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The Position of Freedmen in Roman Society

Cory DiBacco

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Dr. Chappell
At the conclusion of the Late Republic and during the first half of the Roman Empire, freedmen were viewed in status and by the law through multifaceted perspectives. The experience of freedmen during these periods was one that was met with various encouraging attitudes from society, specifically from their former masters or patrons, and the law. During these periods the former masters cared for their freedmen, as the freedmen symbolized a pseudo-filial role with their prior patrons. Roman law established by Augustus in the beginning of the Empire was not designed to directly thwart the progression of freedmen in society but instead ensure that only the most excellent freedman were allowed citizenship as a response to the numerous concerns from prominent elites that too many criminal freedman and generally undeserving ones were acquiring citizenship. The life of freedmen during this time was considerably better than that of a slave. The stain of slavery, the *macula servitutis*, certainly was a permanent marker of the freedmen, and in this way many freedmen were omitted from certain prestigious positions. However, in spite of this mark many that achieved manumission became respectable members of society, as represented by abundant epitaphs and monuments of freedmen during this time period. Many of these gravestones pointed out that freedman preserved encouraging relationships with their patrons. Others depicted a certain freedman’s euergetic ideal, which was an esteemed attribute that many freedmen tried to attain in order to identify themselves as respected members in society. The position of freedmen in Roman society was met with significant countervailing tension because freedmen were marked with certain social disabilities of being a former slave, however, there were methods of integration into Roman society designed as a counter effect to the mark.
The Freedman’s General Place and Understanding in Roman Society

Freedmen in Roman society during the Late Republic and the Empire were seen as objects of concern, anxiety, loyalty and respect. Their complex position in society was certainly uncomfortable for many Romans, yet they were still in many cases respected by their patrons. There was one important distinction that provided a positive outlook for former slaves however, that they were now fundamentally free. Gaius states that all people are either free or slaves.¹ Roman society in this period was extensively hierarchical and freedmen were technically disassociated with slaves, however that stigma stayed with them throughout the entirety of their lives. This was termed the *macula servitutis*, the stain of slavery. Throughout this period there was a strict distinction between those who were free and those who were not. The concept of manumission was uncomfortable in some perspectives because it was the transition of one social category to its complete opposite. It was however heartening for freedmen because not only was manumission possible and in many cases encouraged. In many aspects of society freedmen attained dignity and respect above that of a slave. Freedom was a reward for good behavior and hard work, and it was certainly optimistic that manumission was an option for slaves.²

Many prominent writers of the Late Republic and Empire expressed stoic ideals and recognized the humanity in freedmen as completely separate beings from slaves. This helped freedmen who were trying to integrate themselves into Roman society after

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¹ Gaius, AD 130 – 180, was an important Roman Jurist who wrote the *Institutes* in AD 161 regarding many foremost legal institutions.
slavery. Important members of society such as Cicero conveyed the idea that being a slave was not an inherent trait, but a consequence of outside and natural forces. In many cases slaves were viewed as being socially ‘dead’. However manumission was a maturing process, a new life and social status provided to them. Still however, in many cases the macula servitutis held back freedmen from achieving higher social status. Nonetheless, Cicero believed slaves and freedmen were not inferior by nature, it was the result of external circumstances beyond their control. Seneca the Younger reiterates this ideal in his writings, noting that slaves, freedmen, and freeborn are all born of the same stock and by the same god. Many freedmen reflected the stoic ideal of taking advantage of their position to have a chance of deciding their own place in the world through manumission. Seneca the Elder reaffirms this idea in writing that the slave’s position was of fortune, or how we can undoubtedly perceive as misfortune. Even Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who in his writing despised the system of manumission, relayed the stoic idea of fortune and that freedmen should be judged based on their character and merit. Although a freedman could never be legally equal to an ingenuus, manumission provided the beneficial opportunity for a freedman to achieve some form of a respectful role in Roman Society.  

Those of upper class patrons were given the opportunity to mix in high society and many cultured circles. Freedmen were essential to the aristocracy and to the imperial hierarchy; many were put in charge of important affairs and were given proper education and control over certain business and financial endeavors on behalf of their patrons. These

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3 Ingenuus – Freeborn Roman citizen, recognized firmly by Roman law and society.
duties provided freedmen with valuable experience and important connections to help
them find a comfortable place in Roman society.⁴

The Patron-Freedman Relationship

The dynamics between the freedman and their patron is defined by a quasi-father
and son relationship. Not only did the freedmen receive his new nomen from his patron in
order to be included as a citizen in Roman society, but also it was socially expected that
they maintain a healthy relationship where the freedman was dependent in some way on
his former master. The former owner maintained the title patronus, solidifying this
pseudo-father role. Publilius Syrus, a freedman himself, reaffirms this father-son
relationship in saying that a successful and good freedman is one without nature and one
that follows the obsequium.⁵ A healthy relationship was expected under this socially
constructed term. Even so, assuming the patron’s nomen was very important as that name
could be respected greatly and now the freedman represented that name and bloodline
henceforth. The freedmen were typically treated very well in this relationship, becoming
symbolic members of the familia. Freedmen often remained with the patron family for
generations because of the closeness, mutual respect, and understanding of each other.
The patron was expected to protect his freedman’s welfare. In a recognized example of
the beneficial familia, A. Plautius Euhodus passed his nomen to his freedman, and upon
his death he showed a great deal of respect to this freedman by only permitting access to
his tomb to his children and that freedman. This was a common theme at this time, as

Stoic. 5.33-4. Seneca, Controversae 7.6.18. Treggiari, Late Republic, 227. Josephus, Jewish
⁵ The obsequium is a term that describes this expectation that the freedmen must respect their
patron and could not damage their reputation.
patrons often provided burial places for their freedmen’s families in the same tomb with their own. Maintaining a good relationship with a patron was valuable for the freedmen because they were thus granted more admission to a respectable role in society while being associated with a certain patron, thus easing the tensions many freeborn had towards a former slave being in close societal positions.⁶

Many tombstone inscriptions of freedmen detail the positive relationship with their patrons. This relationship was of course critical for the freedman’s success in finding a proper role in society. In an inscription from Capua, Flavia Nice is noted to be a freedwoman who loved her patron. In another inscription regarding freedwomen, this one from Puteoli, Grania Clara is celebrated as a worthy freedwoman who never caused her patron (Aulus) any vexation. It was not uncommon patrons would help pay for the tombstones of their freedmen. These inscriptions often detail encouraging relationships.

In one particular inscription from Rome of Marcus Canuleius Zosimus, it’s recorded that his patron erected the tombstone because he was a deserving freedmen who excelled everybody in his craft. On the opposite side of this matter, demonstrating this shared mutual respect in the patron-freedman relationship, there is an inscription and tombstone out of Rome that was set up by a freedwoman for her patron. Fabia Nobilis set up the inscription in honor of her patron Quintus Fabius Theogonus, and states that he is the very best and most thoughtful patron, deserving of her loyalty.⁷

A famous example of this mutually respectful relationship between freedmen and their patrons occurs between that of Cicero and his freedman Tiro. This relationship

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⁷ CIL, vol. X, no. 4,142, 8,192. CIL, vol. VI, no. 9,222, 9,673.
depicted between letters exemplifies the ideal of familia between a freedman and their patron. Cicero shows passionate care for his freedman in his letters, he celebrates his manumission, buying of a house, and grave concern when Tiro becomes ill. Cicero also utilized Tiro’s efforts as an advisee, representative of a common theme between manumitters and their freedmen during the Late Republic and the Empire. It is important to note as well that in his letters, specifically one to Terentia, Cicero reiterated the very common social construct that before a slave could be given freedom, they had to show that they worked hard to deserve it. Many contemporaries in the Early Empire under Augustus viewed manumission as the ultimate maturity statement after they had worked hard and matured being a slave. Having gone through this maturing process, they would be ready to become a citizen in Roman Society. Cicero, along with many others, would provide academic and professional training for their slaves and freedmen so that when they joined Roman society as citizens they could be beneficial to the whole. It was not uncommon that slaves learned domestically useful and commercially profitable skills and business experience. Freedmen were found in countless occupations after their manumission. Pliny stresses this idea in one of his letters where he discusses being content with the construct of manumission for this reason. He notes that slaves who have worked hard and been trained in certain measures will certainly benefit society as a whole and the positive development of cities.

The Emperor’s Position on Freedmen

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8 Cicero only named freedmen in his letters that carried important administrative duties. Many go unnamed.
Certain emperors, such as Trajan and Augustus, regulated and promoted proper manumission in the empire. While at the same time, many elites unquestionably supported manumission and illustrated empathy for their freedmen. Pliny, in his letters to Trajan asks him to grant citizenship to numerous freedmen of whom Pliny inherited patronal rights. Trajan was pleased to do so and praised Pliny. He also discusses in his letters of a time where he defended two freedmen who were accused of a heinous crime. It was Pliny’s opinion, which certainly reflected many contemporary opinions, that freedmen were citizens who deserved fair and civilized treatment. In one especially memorable letter, Pliny discusses his discontent after going to a dinner party where hierarchical strict social stratifications defined the dining experience and what meals certain individuals were expected to consume. Although there are always differing perspectives in society, Pliny held a common ideal that this was sickening behavior. Pliny viewed everyone, including freedmen, as equals at his table. Especially those slaves that were obedient and worked hard were thought to be deserving of respect in society in their role as freedmen.\(^\text{10}\)

In the Early Empire Augustus laid a significant precedent in how he managed freedmen, as he was viewed as the ‘model patron’ by upholding more traditional societal hierarchies. As Cicero and Pliny were on the more idealized empathetic spectrum of patrons, Augustus was more moderate. Yet, it is important to note that although Augustus showed strictness, he stressed humanity and respect for freedmen as citizens in Roman society. The slaves and freedmen of the emperor were known as *Familia Caesaris*. This body of individuals was relative elites in the confined society of freedmen and slaves.

\(^{10}\) Pliny, 10.104-5, 7.6.8-9, 2.6.2-4, 19; 9.21.2. Mouritsen, *Roman World*, 292, 293.
They were provided with more powerful duties with their special imperial access to certain amenities. Legally, they were still lower than a freeborn plebian, yet they did enjoy a sort of higher social status by being so close to their respective emperor and the ‘levers’ of power. Under Augustus, many held important secretarial duties, maintaining essential correspondence. In many occasions Augustus was seen socially with his freedmen watching the circus together. Reiterating the point with this in mind, although freedmen held this stigma of slavery and were legally restricted on some accounts of gaining strong power, they were extremely involved in the inner workings of upper class persons and the imperial families. Not only this but they were seen socially with elites, such as the emperor Augustus himself. This however was not always the case all of the time, as it was known that Augustus would exclude freedmen from his more formal dinner parties. There was an exception with Menas, a freedman once belonged to Pompey. Yet, there are recorded occasions where Augustus would stay overnight at his former freedman’s suburban house. This represents the close relationship between patron and freedman that was so common in the Empire. Good relations like these, or with just higher status patrons in general, were very beneficial for the freedmen in finding a place in society. There was of course tension that went along with former slaves being integrated into society, however Augustus put forth the ideal that respectable freedmen should be given valuable experiences and opportunities to become integrated. These relations were powerful and important to a freedmen, because one could not only derive material benefits from a healthy relationship with a patron, but also prestige that goes along with being associated with that patron, should the freedman ever decide to acquire a more significant role in his or her community.11

During the early period of Augustus’ reign there is evidence of freedmen achieving beneficial educational and career opportunities as a result of purposeful encouragement from the Empire. Augustus’ freedman Hyginus, exposed to the inner workings of the elite because of their important duties, had a close relationship with Ovid and the consular and historian Clodius Licinus. Hyginus was poor in his later years and these parties provided him with economic aid, representing a beneficial relationship between that of patrons and freedmen. The freedman Theodorus of Gadara assumed the position of being a tutor for Tiberius and eventually became a procurator in Sicily and put in charge of the Palatine Library. M. Verrius Flaccus, a freedman tutor as well, was paid very well by Augustus to assist in tutoring within the imperial court. It was not uncommon that freedmen that were involved in the aristocracy found respectable roles in society despite the *macula servitutis*.\(^\text{12}\)

**Legislature Regarding the Manumission of Freedmen**

A common false critique of Augustus during the early portion of the Empire is that he thwarted manumission through his institution of certain freedmen laws. Augustus held a very traditional perspective on slavery and freedmen, but this does not exclude the fact that he appreciated freedmen. In the aftermath of the conflict with Sextus Pompey, Augustus claimed to have captured 30,000 slaves whom he transplanted back to their masters for whatever punishment they so deserved for taking up arms against him. This decision represents the traditional approach of Augustus and the response to tensions many had about the integration of former slaves into the public. Augustus expressed that

the decisions of punishment and manumission lie in the hands of the slaves rightful owners, while the newly founded Empire would set up certain guidelines to regulate the system overall. The basis of the manumission laws passed during his reign was focused on the concept of reconstructing the moral past of Roman society. Augustus pushed forth initiatives that reformed moral behavior of citizens and in turn regulated manumission. Augustus placed legal restrictions on manumission in order to preserve the sanctity of Roman citizenship so that citizenship was only given to slaves that truly deserved it and would become functioning and beneficial members of society. This was in a way beneficial to solving the tension that many freeborn had in this period. It was comforting to many that generally only slaves of high quality would be manumitted and integrated into society. This is a result of many concerns at the time from elites that felt citizenship and informal manumission was being awarded to slaves that did not deserve it, specifically ones that had committed some form of crime. The legislation *lex Aelia Sentina* according to Gaius ruled that slaves who had been severely punished, branded, tortured, found guilty of a crime, fought in the arena, or imprisoned, could not become freedmen. They were given the title of *peregrini dediticii*.¹³ Not allowed to become citizens, they were banned from living inside the walls of Rome as an effort to relinquish criminal slaves out of the citizen body. This law was for the greater benefit of Roman society, as slaves without a criminal background had no issue achieving manumission. Dionysius of Halicarnassus was feverously outspoken in his disagreement of the manumission of criminal slaves as he felt it was a contamination to the empire. This law

¹³ *peregrini dediticii* meant defeated and surrendered foreigners.

The process of manumission was understood as a maturing progression in Roman society, and Augustus’ laws reiterated this conviction. A core part of the legislation, the \textit{lex Aelia Sentina}, enforced the law that slaves had to be at least thirty years old to be manumitted. This represented the ideal that slaves ultimately received freedom after a long record of devoted service to their masters. Also, manumitters had to be a minimum of twenty years old and not mentally ill. This conveyed the concept that Augustus believed the people responsible for manumission should be of mature status themselves, and of sound mind. According to Dio, the aim of this legislation was to prevent owners freeing slaves ‘indiscriminately.’ The \textit{lex Iunia} similarly addressed regulatory issues with manumission. This legislation stipulated that informally manumitted slaves were not defined by the state as full Roman citizens.\footnote{Through formal procedure the slave would be presented in front of a magistrate to be officially recognized as manumitted.} The informal freedmen were designated free during their lifetime but recognized as a slave upon their death. Along the lines of Augustus wanting to regulate and formalize manumissions, these policies did not hold back or thwart any attempts by slaves to acquire their freedom. These pieces of legislation were designed to ensure that the only valuable slaves could become freedmen and thus be provided with a Roman citizenship and its perks.\footnote{Dio LV.13.7. Kleijwegt, 322, 323. Mouritsen, Roman World, 35, 80, 84, 85.}

The \textit{seviri Augustales}
After manumission many freedmen successfully entered organizations or positions of public office in spite of a stigma that a person who was at any point a slave was inherently socially and legally disabled. Disregarding the *macula servitutis*, and the assumption that freedmen could never truly be equivalent in status to an *ingenuus*, some freedmen did manage to become well off and were respected for their community and civic contributions. It is important to note that different localities in the vast Empire had different and unique circumstances. There had always been a muddle of complex assertions of acceptance or prejudice from freeborn citizens, something that many scholars argue populations turn off and on according to their localities’ circumstances. Throughout the early half of the century it was taboo for freedmen to assume powerful positions in the public, such as in the senate or as equestrians. However, opportunities to engage in public affairs, especially community ones, were certainly available to freedmen. This was very popular for freedmen to be involved in these matters, and they were bestowed with the *ornamenta*. Many freedmen found solace and comfort in the *seviri Augustales*.

The *macula servitutis* repressed many freedmen from achieving certain professions and places of higher status in Roman society. Many could not enter the ranks of Senator or equestrian, as well as the highest military positions and municipal magistracies. However, their children for the most part could acquire these positions. Promisingly enough, the offspring of freedmen commonly benefited from complete societal equality with other freeborn Romans. The great poet Horace and the Emperor

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17 Outer symbols of rank and office.
Pertinax were both sons of freedmen. According to Mouritsen, many descendents of freedmen became part of the Equestrian class and some entered the senate. Although freedmen who were born as slaves could not acquire these higher status positions, it was clear that they could still be certainly involved in public life. The *seviri Augustales* was one important medium for freedmen to achieve a respectable position in Roman society.

The *seviri Augustales* was an integral part of the freedman’s experience in the early Roman Empire as it can be recognized as the freedman’s importance in public affairs and local economies. This innovation provided freedmen a secure organization that promoted specific attention to civic duties on behalf of the Empire and in the freedman’s locality. The *seviri Augustales* specifically was very active in funding local projects through generous donations. These freedmen desired to follow euergetic ideals as a key to acquiring a valuable and respected role in society. Freedman such as N. Festius Ampliatus, Munatius Faustus, and C. Calventius Quietus, on behalf of the *Augustalis*, sponsored games, financed distribution of grain, and acted as major benefactors of many public projects in Pompeii, respectively. Especially successful and wealthy freedmen gave back charitable sums to their communities and to the Empire for recognition and public esteem. The *Augustalis* were respected for these donations, as this was a way for freedmen to effectively purchase their public status in society. Other scholars argue that this Augustan institution was designed to keep the freedmen’s attention away from any real authority, as the *seviri Augustales* was more of a symbolic group than anything. This is an incorrect justification however; the *seviri Augustales*

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19 Horace’s father was a Venutian captive taken during the Social War by the Romans and forced into slavery. Pertinax’s father was another former slave known as Helvius Successus.

groups offered wealthy freedmen access to public esteem that every member of Roman Society strived for, while at the same time permitting the freedmen to become more involved in the public affairs of their respective localities. This group, promoted by Augustus, was very beneficial to the freedmen for these reasons. Public benefaction and donation helped to remove the stain and stigma associated with slavery and releave freeborn tension about active freedmen in society. These were all characteristics of an active and excellent Roman citizen; exactly what Augustus and the elites during this time period preferred the freedmen to be.21

Freedmen incorporated the euergetic role in order to counteract the *macula servitutis* that inhibited them from achieving certain higher societal ranks. These freedmen publically donated profusely on temples, games, roads, and other infrastructure projects for societal returns and the generation of public esteem. The members of this cult were provided with preferential treatment from freeborn, allowing their participation in more exclusive dinners, special seats at events, and other symbols of prestige. This was of course a direct response to the freedmen taking up these euergetic roles for benefit of the common good that was respected in all of Roman society. In an inscription from Pompeii, Popidius Ampliatus is described as a freedman who generously rebuilt the temple of Isis because he was barred from a public career. In spite of the *macula servitutis*, and the tension freeborn felt towards freedmen, Popidius, like many freedmen of this time, found other ways to find respectable positions in society where they were allowed. In another partcialur inscription, Publius Decimius Eros Merula is honored to be a freedman who became a successful surgeon as a member of the *seviri Augustales*. He is

depicted to have donated 30,000 sesterces for the construction of statues in the temple of Hercules and 37,000 sesterces to help pave new streets in his locality. These freedmen looked to the serviri Augustales and to euergetic actions to find respectable positions in a society and to ease freeborn tension where they would otherwise be rather repressed.\textsuperscript{22}

**Freedmen Epitaphs**

An analysis of freedmen epitaphs reveals that they embraced their slave past and prided themselves on earning manumission and freedom. Despite the macula servitutis inhibiting certain status positions, and the tension that many freeborn had towards freedmen in society, these freedman prided themselves on their slave past as something they overcame with hard work to achieve proper positions in Roman society. In many municipalities freedman make up a disproportionate number of epitaphs as compared to the freeborn population. The reason they constructed great numbers of epitaphs was because freedmen wished to commemorate openly their earned citizen status as well as economic success after overcoming slavery. Many epitaphs also memorialized their public benefactions as well, indicating the gratification they took in being active and valuable Roman citizens. Numerous inscriptions in Ostia depict the proud euergetic roles freedmen assumed. An inscription of M. Licinius Privatus notes he donated 50,000 sesterces to his municipal treasury. Another particular inscription depicts a M. Acutius M. I. Noetus who bequeathed his fortune to pay for public games and dinners for his municipality. These freedmen just like A. Ritius A.l. Tertius in Concordia, who left

\textsuperscript{22} Lewis and Reinhold, 230, 249, 259. *CIL*, vol. X. no. 8,921. *CIL*, vol. XI, no. 5,400.
300,000 sesterces for the paving of local roads, took great pride in their donations and wished to present this to the whole of society.\textsuperscript{23}

The practice of building these self-commemorative monuments largely boomed during the early reign of Augustus by local freeborn elites. The freedmen were certainly capable of attaining status even though they were socially inhibited from certain upper class professions. Horace in his \textit{Satires} speaks about how his father had been a slave and then a freedman. His father found success as a freedman because there were opportunities present to allow him to do so. He details that he could never be ashamed of his father nor does he feel the need to apologize in any way for being the son of a freedman. Horace notes that many believe the \textit{macula servitutis} inhibits social and economic progression, but in spite of that his father, like many freedmen who construct these epitaphs, embraced their past and were proud of overcoming these difficulties to acquire respectable roles in society.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{Conclusion}

In the end of the Late Republic and during the first half of the Empire, especially throughout the reign of Augustus, it is evident that freedmen had a unique experience in Roman society. This experience was polarizing for freedmen, as they of course suffered from social prejudices and the \textit{macula servitutis} associated with their experience with


slavery. However, in spite of this, it is clear that the freedmen did have an encouraging experience through legislation that promoted active and proper citizenship, supportive and generous patrons whom on many occasions assumed the role of a respectful father taking care of their freedmen, and the ability to succeed to some degree publically and in status in this period as represented by the proud self-commemorative epitaphs found throughout the expanses of the Roman Empire. In order to counteract the tension of freeborn towards the manumission process of allowing former slaves to be citizens, many freedmen incorporated euergetic roles in their localities. These roles were achieved through the active public participation of the seviri Augustales in many Roman municipalities. Freedmen during this time incorporated these methods in order to integrate themselves into Roman society despite the countervailing tension from freeborn.

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