

Freedmen and freedwomen

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Upon manumission, a slave became a freedman or freedwoman (*libertus/a*, ἀπελεύθερος/α; see MANUMISSION, GREEK AND ROMAN). We have considerably more legal, epigraphic, and literary sources for the legal status, functions, and experiences of freedmen and freedwomen in the Roman world than in Classical Greece or the Hellenistic world. The willingness to enfranchise freedmen was praised by King Philip V of Macedonia as a commendable Roman peculiarity (*Syll.* 543; 214 BCE). Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 4.24), a Greek historian writing at the end of the first century BCE, noted the prevalence of manumission among the Romans. This is not to say, however, that manumission was rare in the Greek or the Hellenistic world. Sacral manumission, that is, the practice of manumitting slaves through a fictitious “sale” to a god or goddess, for example, was widespread in the Hellenistic world. From Delphi alone, we have more than 1300 texts that preserve records of manumission through Apollo from the last two centuries BCE and the first century CE. While this large corpus of manumission inscriptions provides a wealth of information concerning prices for manumission-by-sale, and conditions under which a slave may gain full freedom, it is less informative of the lives or aspirations of the freedmen and freedwomen. It is clear, however, that in both the Greek and the Roman worlds, freedman status was a legal category, and freedmen and freedwomen did not constitute a homogeneous social class. Although freedmen and freedwomen were all faced with various (legal) limitations, and the servile past could not be erased, there were also tremendous differences in terms of their socio-economic connections, financial status, and social mobility in any given society. Furthermore, in both Greece and Rome, ex-slaves had

various obligations to their former masters, who still retained rights over them.

In Athens, slaves who gained freedom continued to have limited legal capacities. They could not own land or property in Athens; nor could they contract legal marriages with Athenian citizens. The status of freedmen was similar to that of metics (resident foreigners). Legal differences also existed between these two groups: the freedmen, for example, were required to pay a three-obol tax in addition to the metic tax (Zelnick-Abramovitz 2005). Some freedmen, however, are known to have gained Athenian citizenship. Pasion (d. 370/69 BCE), an ex-slave banker, was granted Athenian citizenship due to his benefactions. His own freedman Phormion also became an Athenian citizen (*Dem.* 36, 45, 46, 49, 50, 52, 53). In the Roman republican period, slaves were incorporated into the citizen body after being freed. More restrictions on manumission and the judicial status of freedmen and freedwomen, however, were introduced under AUGUSTUS. The *lex Fufia Caninia* (2 BCE; Gai. *Inst.* 1.43), for example, limited the number of slaves that could be emancipated by their master’s testament. A master with two to ten slaves was allowed to free one half; with ten to thirty, a third; with thirty to a hundred, a quarter; and with a hundred to five hundred, no more than a fifth, and never more than a hundred. By virtue of the *Lex Aelia Sentia* (4 CE; Gai. *Inst.* 1. 17–8; 37–41), no slave under the age of thirty could be manumitted, and no Roman citizen under the age of twenty could emancipate a slave unless a legitimate cause could be established before a committee composed of senators and equestrians. A freedman did not automatically become a Roman citizen except if he was above thirty years of age, if he was the Quiritarian property of his master, and if he was formally and appropriately manumitted (that is, by the rod or by census, or by will). The *lex Junia* of uncertain date (perhaps under either Augustus or Tiberius; Gai. *Inst.* 1.22; 3.56) granted Latin rights to the informally freed

slaves, who were called the Junian Latins (*Latini Juniani*).

Slaves could be manumitted by either an individual or a corporation, such as a city or a voluntary association. Corporate manumission of slaves was also a common practice in early Christianity (Harrill 1995). The relationship between the freedmen/women and their former masters – now called patrons – was regulated by law. Freedmen and freedwomen were bound to their patrons in a number of ways: they owed their patrons respect (*see OBSEQUIUM*), and were required to perform services (*operae libertorum*; Dig. 38.1; Waldstein 1986). The freedman was forbidden to sue his patron under civil or criminal law. The freedman who possessed over 100,000 sesterces was obliged to leave a fraction of his estate to his patron unless he had three or more children (Gai. *Inst.* 3. 39–44). There were, however, anecdotes indicating amicable or positive relationships between patrons and freedmen/women. Cicero's freedman Tiro, for example, remained his confidant throughout his life. Some masters married their own freedwomen. Freedmen/women were considered part of the household of their patrons, and were often granted burial slots in their patrons' family tombs. Freedmen and freedwomen were found in a wide variety of occupations. They may have also depended on their patrons for capital, the sites of their shops, and various other forms of support (Mouritsen 2001). All freedmen involved in business were not merely agents or dependents of their former masters. Independent freedmen certainly existed, especially if they were freed *ex testamento* (*orcini*), or moved farther away from their former masters. Scholars, however, disagree to what extent the likelihood of independent freedmen was numerically significant (Mouritsen 2001: 8).

Outside of the private households, freedmen also served a wide range of public functions in Roman society. In the first three centuries CE, the standing fire brigades of Rome were composed of thousands of freedmen. Hundreds of slaves and freedmen were employed to serve the water supply under the Julio-Claudians

(Frontin. *Aq.* 116.4). The *lex Visellia* of 24 CE (*CJ* 9.21) excluded freedmen from the municipal magistracies and decurionate. However, they could serve as neighborhood magistrates (*magistri vici*), and "civil servants" (*apparitores*), such as *scribae* (secretaries), *viatores* (messengers), *praecones* (heralds), and *lictores* (fasces bearers), attending to magistrates of various ranks. Freedmen and freedwomen were involved in supplying Rome's grain (*annona*). The operation of the Roman government also made heavy use of imperial freedmen as clerks as well as secretaries in charge of administrative matters ranging from correspondence and petitions, to public finances and the emperor's properties in the empire (*see FAMILIA CAESARIS*).

There seems to have been a high percentage of wealthy freedmen among the organizations of *seviri*, *Augustales*, and *seviri Augustales* in the western cities (*see AUGUSTALES*). Freedmen were also frequently found among members and magistrates of associations, though membership in the associations by no means only appealed to the freedmen (*see ASSOCIATIONS, GREEK AND ROMAN; COLLEGIA*).

The freedmen and freedwomen were active participants in the epigraphic culture. It has been argued that the freed population seemed to be more eager to communicate with posterity through the medium of inscriptions, especially epitaphs, at least in imperial Italy (Mouritsen 2001; 2005). It must be noted, however, that freedmen and freedwomen are not always easy to recognize on inscriptions (Peterson 2006). Patron's *praenomen* and *libertus* (often abbreviated as *l.* or *lib.*) inserted between the *gentilicium* and *cognomen* indicates freedman status. From the middle of the first century CE onward, such status indicators tended to be omitted, except in the case of imperial freedmen. Where the status indicator is lacking, a Greek *cognomen* may, but not necessarily, suggest freedman status. Scholars have also noted the chronological limits of the value of Greek *cognomina* as status indicators. As people with Greek *cognomina* began to hold high magistracies and enter the senatorial

order, the servile associations of the names gradually disappeared. Thus, as far as the third century is concerned, it becomes very difficult to say with any confidence whether a Greek *cognomen* is indicative of freedman status or not. Freedmen could also have Latin *cognomina*. Therefore, ex-slaves may well have had names indistinguishable from the *ingenui*. In the Greek inscriptions from the Roman period, the names of freedmen and freedwomen are even more difficult to detect.

Children born to freedmen after manumission, however, were freeborn, and were not subject to the legal restrictions imposed on freedmen. Upward social mobility was a real possibility for the descendants of freedmen and freedwomen, who were found among local magistrates and could even rise to the senatorial and equestrian ranks (Tac. *Ann.* 13.27). The societal attitudes toward freedmen/women and their descendants were by no means free from prejudice or discrimination. Despite the freedmen's free status, elite authors such as Cicero quite often referred to them derogatively as "slaves" (e.g., *Rosc. Am.* 48.140). The Roman author Petronius created a famous caricature of an immensely wealthy, vulgar, and pretentious freedman in his novel *Satyricon* through the character Trimalchio. The Roman poet Juvenal also mocked freedmen in several of his *Satires*. In the imperial period, senators and their descendants for three generations were banned from marrying freedmen and freedwomen. While a freeborn woman was exempt from guardianship (*tutela*) if she had three children, a freedwoman was required to have four children in order to enjoy the exemption.

The distinction between freeborn citizens and freedmen persisted for a long time in the Roman Empire until Justinian's reign (527–65 CE). Not only did Justinian formally

repeal such restrictive laws as the *lex Fufia Caninia*, but he also ruled that freedom granted to slaves should be unqualified (Justinian *Inst.* 1. 5; 7.5–6). Justinian asserted that all freedmen should become Roman citizens, regardless of their age, or the interest of the manumittor, or the mode of manumission.

SEE ALSO: Emancipation.

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