

## Freedmen: new citizens

Juvenal & Suetonius on successful freedmen

### Source 1: Juvenal's *Satires*

The following passage comes from Juvenal's *Satires*, a collection of satirical poems written in the late 1st century to the early 2nd century AD. The satires discuss and make fun of a range of social and political situations. This passage takes place at a *salutatio*, where clients visit a patron.

Juvenal *Satires* 1.97 - 116 (translation G. G. Ramsay, adapted)

ille tamen faciem prius inspicit et trepidat ne  
 suppositus venias ac falso nomine poscas:  
 agnitus accipies, iubet a praecone vocari  
 ipsos Troiugenas<sup>1</sup>, nam vexant limen et ipsi  
 nobiscum, 'da praetori, da deinde tribuno.'  
 sed libertinus prior est. 'prior' inquit 'ego adsum.  
 cur timeam dubitemve locum defendere? quamvis  
 natus ad Euphraten, molles quod in aure fenestrae<sup>2</sup>  
 arguerint, licet ipse negem, sed quinque tabernae  
 quadringenta<sup>3</sup> parant, quid confert purpura maior<sup>4</sup>  
 optandum, si Laurenti custodit in agro  
 conductas Corvinus<sup>5</sup> oves, ego possideo plus  
 Pallante et Licinis<sup>6</sup>?' expectent ergo tribuni,  
 vincant divitiae, sacro ne cedat honori<sup>7</sup>  
 nuper in hanc urbem pedibus qui venerat albis<sup>8</sup>,  
 quandoquidem inter nos sanctissima divitiarum  
 maiestas, etsi funesta Pecunia templo  
 nondum habitas, nullas nummorum ereximus aras,  
 ut colitur Pax atque Fides Victoria Virtus  
 quaeque salute crepitat Concordia nido.

*He [the patron] first inspects your face, fearing that you may be claiming under someone else's name: once recognised, you will get your share. He then orders the crier to call up the Trojan-blooded nobles<sup>1</sup>----for they too besiege the door as well as we: "The Praetor first," he says, "and after him the Tribune." But a freedman is first. "I was here first!," he says, "why should I be afraid, or hesitate to defend my place in the queue? Though I was born on the Euphrates - a fact which the holes<sup>2</sup> in my effeminate ears would testify even though I myself might deny it - I am the owner of five shops which bring me in four hundred thousand sesterces<sup>3</sup>. What better thing does the Broad Purple<sup>4</sup> provide, if some Corvinus<sup>5</sup> herds sheep for daily wage in the Laurentian country, while I possess more property than either a Pallas or the likes of Licinus<sup>6</sup>?" So let the Tribunes wait! Let cash be the conqueror, let the sacred office<sup>7</sup> give way to one who came into our city with whitened feet<sup>8</sup> only yesterday. For no god is held in such reverence amongst us as wealth; though as yet, o fatal Pecunia (Cash), you have no temple of your own; and we have not yet set up altars to money, like we worship Peace and Honour, Victory and Virtue, or that Concord that twitters when we salute her nest.*

<sup>1</sup> The Roman aristocratic elite who could claim descent from the Trojans.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that the freedman's ears are pierced shows his Asian descent.

<sup>3</sup> The requirement for an *equus* (a knight) was property worth 400,000 sesterces. The freedman states he has 400,000 as his income.

<sup>4</sup> A reference to the stripe on togas worn by senators, the *latus clavus*.

<sup>5</sup> One of an ancient Roman family, who had fallen on bad times.

<sup>6</sup> Pallas and Licinus were wealthy Roman freedmen.

<sup>7</sup> The office of tribune was considered sacrosanct.

<sup>8</sup> Foreign slaves for sale at a market would have their feet marked with

What is the freedman's opinion in the passage of who should be respected most in Roman society?

Do you think Juvenal approves of the freedman?

Consider also the passage below, from earlier on in Satire 1. You may also wish to consider the fact that Juvenal himself was the son of a wealthy freedman.

Juvenal *Satires* 1.24 - 30 (translation G. G. Ramsay, adapted)

patricios omnis opibus cum provocet unus  
quo tondente gravis iuveni mihi barba sonabat<sup>1</sup>,  
cum pars Niliacae plebis, cum verna Canopi  
Crispinus<sup>2</sup> Tyrias umero revocante lacernas<sup>3</sup>  
ventilet aestivum digitis sudantibus aurum<sup>4</sup>,  
nec sufferre queat maioris pondera gemmae,  
difficile est saturam non scribere ...

... when a guy under whose razor my stiff  
youthful beard used to grate<sup>1</sup> challenges, with his  
single wealth, the whole nobility; when a  
guttersnipe of the Nile like Crispinus<sup>2</sup>—a slave-  
born denizen of Canopus—hitches a Tyrian cloak  
on to his shoulder<sup>3</sup>, whilst on his sweating finger  
he sports a summer ring of gold<sup>4</sup>, unable to  
endure the weight of a heavier gem —  
it is hard not to write satire.

<sup>1</sup> i.e. a common barber who has now made a fortune

<sup>2</sup> Crispinus was a rich Egyptian parvenue who had made it to be on the emperor Domitian's council.

<sup>3</sup> Tyrian purple was a famously expensive colour to dye clothes with, made from crushed shellfish.

<sup>4</sup> It is not certain what exactly the reference to a summer ring is about. It might be that it is a reference to the luxury of heaving different jewellery for each season.

What does Juvenal criticise Crispinus for?

Why does he say "it's hard not to write satire"?

Does reading this passage help with your interpretation of the *salutatio* passage?

Thinking about both the Juvenal passages:

Do you think these satires says more about the 'truth' in Rome,  
or more about the attitudes of Juvenal (and people like him)?

Is this just as valuable as knowing about the reality?

## Source 2: Suetonius *Claudius*

The text in the passage below is from the historian Suetonius' account of the life of the emperor Claudius.

Suetonius *Life of Claudius* 39 (translation John D. Clare)

his, ut dixi, uxoribusque addictus, non principem se, sed ministrum egit, compendio cuiusque horum uel etiam studio aut libidine honores exercitus impunitates supplicia largitus est, et quidem insciens plerumque et ignarus. ac ne singillatim minora quoque enumerem, reuocatas liberalitates eius, iudicia rescissa, suppositos aut etiam palam immutatos datorum officiorum codicillos.

*I have already explained how much his freedmen and wives controlled Claudius; he behaved towards them more like a slave than an emperor. He gave them honours, army commands, and freedom from penalties and punishments, depending on what each wanted or was interested in at the time. Most of the time he had no knowledge of what he was doing. I will not list each small detail one by one, such as recalling his gifts, cancelling his decisions, issuing new privileges in place of old ones, or even openly changing the wording of the ones he had given.*

What is the relationship between Claudius and his freedmen, according to Suetonius?

Do you think Suetonius would have been just as critical if Claudius had been controlled by freeborn citizens (rather than freedmen, and his wives)?

Thinking about both the Suetonius and the Juvenal passages:

Both Juvenal and Suetonius' accounts tell stories of freedmen being very successful.

What are the attitudes of both writers to successful freedmen?

What can these sources tell us about Roman attitudes to freedmen in general?