CHAPTER 1

Freed Slaves and the Roman Elite

Freed slaves in the Roman world commanded a remarkable amount of wealth and influence, despite the restrictions placed on their freedom. Artisans and shopkeepers whose working lives began in captivity were able to amass substantial assets after manumission. High-ranking freedmen (*liberti*) from aristocratic households, including that of the emperor, enjoyed even greater opportunities for advancement. Select freedmen gained access to the inner sanctums of political authority, for instance by serving as support staff for elite patrons, by association with the reigning *princeps*, or by promoting the careers of their freeborn sons in local politics. This upwardly mobile subset of former slaves constituted a "freed elite" – a stigmatized, but highly integrated, population that contributed in myriad ways to the economy, politics, society, and culture of the Roman empire, particularly in urban centers.[1]

Interaction among slaves, freedmen, and freeborn individuals (*ingenui*) of various ranks was a pervasive feature of Roman society. Despite occupying a subordinate status, slaves lived and worked closely among the free.[2] According to Tacitus, when the murder of Pedanius Secundus

[1] Bell and Ramsby (2012: 4). Mouritsen (2011a) is the most comprehensive and up-to-date study of Roman freedmen currently available; despite differences in focus, my debt to this work will be apparent from the frequency with which it is cited on a range of key issues. Treggiari (1969) also remains fundamental, as does Fabre (1981). On specific questions related to Roman manumission and the status and cultural practices of ex-slaves, see especially Perry (2014); Borbonus (2014); Bell and Ramsby (2012); D'Ambra and Métraux (2006); George (2005, 2006); Joshel (1992); Kleijwegt (2001, 2006); Petersen (2006); Mouritsen (2004, 2005); Gardner (1993: 7–51); Bradley (1984: 81–112; 1994: 154–165); Waldstein (1986); Kampen (1981); Kleiner (1977); Zanker (1975); Weaver (1972); Boulvert (1970); Chantraine (1967); Lambert (1934). The frequency of manumission at Rome and size of the freed population are extremely difficult to quantify; for recent approaches to this problem, see Scheidel (2005); De Ligt and Garnsey (2012).

[2] Roman ideology defined slaves as "outsiders within," as noted by Finley (1998: 299–300); Parker (1998: 254); see also Patterson (1982: 39–40). On slaves in the Roman house, see Joshel and Petersen (2014: 24–86); Joshel (2013: 109–120); George (1997; 2011: 388–390); Wallace-Hadrill (1988: 77–81; 1994: 38–64); Webster (2005).

prompted the execution of that man's entire slave household, the *plebs* came to the defense of the innocent.[3] Condemning 400 slaves to death would not have incited a public outcry without the existence of significant ties between these men and women and the wider community.[4] Such ties could have formed through kinship, economic activity, neighborhoods, and guilds, to name a few probable contexts.[5] At the same time, slaves of Roman aristocrats circulated at the highest echelons of society and, in part because of their ubiquitous presence, were essential to elite self-definition.[6]

Upon manumission, ex-slaves joined the free community but continued to bear the stigma of their prior condition.[7] In the Roman system, those who had been liberated through formal channels became citizens (*cives*). Although barred from holding magistracies and serving in the regular army, these *liberti* were able to vote, form legal marriages, own and transmit property, and produce legitimate children.[8] The Romans' practice of enfranchising freedmen was unique in the ancient Mediterranean, and contemporary observers praised its capacity to increase the size of the citizenry.[9] However, the enrollment of former slaves in the *civitas* also raised anxiety among the Greco-Roman elite about the integrity of Rome's civic body.[10] Even if they agreed that the custom's foundations were sound in principle, aristocrats worried about the perceived quality of the freedmen

[3] Tac. *Ann*. 14.42.2: "However that may be, when according to ancient custom (*vetere ex more*) it was proper that the entire slave household which had dwelled under the same roof be led off to execution, in the throng of plebeians, who were protecting the innocent, things reached a point of insurrection and the senate [was besieged]; even in that body there was a group who opposed excessive severity, while most were of the opinion that nothing should be changed." For the practice of executing slaves whose master has been murdered, see Cic. *Fam*. 4.12; on the *SC Silanianum* (10 CE) and later decisions that reinforced this rule, see now Harries (2013).

[4] Finley (1998: 171): "The plebeian riots were aimed not at slavery as an institution, but at saving the lives of individuals with whom the *plebs* (many of them freedmen or descendants of freedmen, some of them presumably slaves themselves) associated with daily in their work and their social life."

[5] On the social composition of Rome's neighborhoods, see Lott (2004: 4); for guilds, Tran (2006b: esp. 49–88); for mixed-status families, see Rawson (1966); Weaver (1986).

[6] Fitzgerald (2000: 5); Edmondson (2011: 346).

[7] Mouritsen (2011a: 12); *contra* Vermote (2016).

[8] On specific limits faced by ex-slaves in civil law, including with respect to patrons' rights of testation, see Gardner (1993: 20–32). Exceptions to the general rule against freed magistrates are analyzed by Coles (2017).

[9] The earliest reliable evidence for this practice is *XII Tabulae* (Warmington) 5.8; cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.22.3–4 (where the custom is attributed to Servius Tullius) and Livy 2.5.9–10 (where it is dated to 509 BCE); Mouritsen (2011a: 68). For a positive evaluation of the Romans' enfranchisement of freedmen, see above all the famous letter to the Greek city of Larisa by Philip V of Macedon (*SIG*^{3} 543).

[10] Livy's account of Romulus' Asylum characterizes the newcomers as a mob "without distinction between slave or free" (1.8.6); see Dench (2005: 11–20) on this myth. Cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 4.24 for a Greek author's criticism of the practice of manumission by Romans in later periods.

who became eligible for the privilege. Augustus' manumission laws, for example, were likely designed to restore a sense of order by establishing controls over the freeing of slaves.[11]

The institution of patronage facilitated the integration of *liberti* into free society.[12] In theory, if not always in practice, Roman freedmen's quasi-familial bond with their patrons ensured that they would have proper guidance. Manumitted slaves regularly assumed the *praenomen* and *nomen* of their owner, with *libertus* appearing where *filius* did in the nomenclature of freeborn citizens.[13] The paternalism apparent in this onomastic convention distinguished *liberti* from freeborn clients, whose connection to patrons was framed more in terms of friendship than of kinship, despite the relevance of these forms of dependency to each other.[14] Patronage sustained masters' authority after manumission, in addition to supporting freedmen's careers. Many ex-slaves worked for their patron directly or received financial support for their own business ventures.[15] Having an elite patron could enhance a freedman's social standing and benefit his freeborn offspring.

Even as *liberti* interacted closely with other groups, they shared with each other the basic experiences of enslavement and manumission.[16] These experiences in turn shaped their engagement of Roman culture in ways that produced a discernible subculture, albeit one with changeable boundaries. For the principate, that subculture is visible to modern historians largely through epigraphic and archaeological evidence, especially (but not exclusively) in the area of funerary commemoration. Most strikingly, freedmen in imperial Rome and Italy commissioned funerary inscriptions in significantly higher proportions than did *ingenui* of any rank.[17] Like all commemorators, these freedmen worked within established parameters to represent themselves, their kin, and their close associates, for example by attesting the stability of families after manumission or by citing vocational

[11] Mouritsen (2011a: 91–92); Bradley (1994: 157).
[12] This issue is covered in depth by Mouritsen (2011a: 36–51).
[13] Fabre (1981: 93–127).
[14] On the application of *amicitia* to the client–patron relationship, see Saller (1982: 11–15); see below, pp. 79–80.
[15] Mouritsen (2011a: 206–247) emphasizes the importance of patronage to freed slaves' success in the Roman economy; cf. the concept of the "independent freedman" proffered by Veyne (1961), Garnsey (1981); reassessed by Verboven (2012: 95–98).
[16] Mouritsen (2011a: 284).
[17] Mouritsen (2004; 2005: 38; 2011a: 127–128); Taylor (1961); D'Arms (1974: 112); Sigismund Nielsen (1997: 203); King (2000: 121–122); Heinzelmann (2000), cf. Mouritsen (2004); Beltrán Lloris (2004) for Roman Spain; Carroll (2006: 247–250); Cooley (2012: 53–54). It should be noted that soldiers also developed an epigraphic subculture, but with its own character and motivations; see Hope (1997, 2001, 2003a, 2003b).

titles.[18] The strategies that ex-slaves used in commemorative settings furnish valuable evidence for how they negotiated their place in society.[19]

At the same time, the subculture in which *liberti* participated interacted with others, including that of the freeborn elite. Although literary texts and inscribed monuments require different kinds of analysis, evaluating these sources against one another has the potential to illuminate an exchange of cultural forms between aristocrats and former slaves. To be certain, the freedmen who appear in Roman literature tend to embody aristocratic assumptions and stereotypes, although there are important exceptions to this commonly cited rule.[20] Yet even the most prejudiced authors – men like Petronius and the younger Pliny – demonstrate relatively detailed knowledge of freedmen's commemorative practices. They appropriate, selectively and for their own rhetorical purposes, strategies that *liberti* developed in response to their distinctive condition.

This appropriation came in many guises, from parody to encomia for members of the imperial household in works like Seneca's *Ad Polybium* and Statius' *Silvae*. It was not always made explicit, nor was it necessarily less exploitative than the literary representation of slaves. Yet under the principate, I will argue, models borrowed from freedmen provided one mechanism for the transformation of elite culture. When the rise of monarchy altered the traditional paths through which most aristocrats pursued lasting glory, members of the elite turned to commemorative strategies that were adapted in part from ex-slaves. These strategies include the derivation of honor from hard work and loyal service (Chapters 2–4), but also the reliance on frameworks other than those prescribed by the dominant ideology to measure personal progress (Chapter 5). Among the network of subcultures that made up Roman culture, that of *liberti* interacted productively with that of the elite to catalyze historical change.[21]

[18] Family: Mouritsen (2005; 2011a: 285–289). Community: Borbonus (2014). Work: Joshel (1992); George (2006). See also Petersen (2006: 84–120, 184–226); Leach (2006).

[19] Petersen and Joshel (2014) have fruitfully applied Certeau's distinction between "strategy" and "tactic" to masters and slaves in the Roman world. By contrast, where the burial culture of *liberti* is concerned, I would argue that ex-slaves' forays into "enemy territory" established command over space and memory in a way that Certeau's "tactics" do not (Certeau 1984: 36–39). Freedmen's monuments sought to establish a lasting record, even if commemorators' use of language and iconography may be described as opportunistic. On these grounds, I have opted not to distinguish between "strategy" and "tactic" in the technical sense for the purposes of this study.

[20] See below, pp. 73–103.

[21] Wallace-Hadrill (2008a: 3–37); Bell and Ramsby (2012); and, from a different perspective, Patterson (1991: 227–257).

Revisiting the Tomb of the Baker

Although its status as a representative of freed culture has been called into question, the Tomb of the Baker nevertheless provides a useful point of departure. Standing today outside the Porta Maggiore in Rome, the monument was built from travertine blocks in the second half of the first century BCE and originally rose more than 30 feet above street level (fig. 1).[22] Its three extant sides are punctuated by cylindrical openings that have been persuasively identified as kneading machines, as well as by inscriptions that commemorate the deceased, Eurysaces.[23] The longest and most complete version of this text is located on the western face:[24]

> Est hoc monimentum Margei Vergilei Eurysacis | pistoris redemptoris apparet(oris).
>
> This is the tomb of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, baker, contractor, public servant.

Peering toward the roof of this peculiar tomb, viewers encounter a frieze that depicts scenes from a commercial bakery, presumably meant to evoke the establishment in which Eurysaces acquired his fortune (figs. 2–4).

All three panels of the frieze display equipment used in the mass production of bread.[25] On the south face, donkeys power two grinders at the center of the frame while state officials record the receipt of grain. Enslaved workers in tunics operate the mills and sift flour, and a togate manager oversees quality control.[26] On the north face, the processes of kneading and shaping the dough lead to the image of a large oven, into which a slave inserts loaves to be cooked; at this point, the panel breaks off. The western face shows the finished product being carried in baskets, weighed on a tall set of scales, and registered by state officials. Taken together, the panels construct a progressive narrative about the phases of

[22] Ciancio Rossetto (1973); Brandt (1993); Petersen (2003; 2006: 84–120). For a review of the debate about dating Eurysaces' monument, see Brandt (1993: 13); Petersen (2006: 99, n. 44).

[23] Kneading machines: Ciancio Rossetto (1973: 34); Petersen (2006: 110–114). Inscriptions: *CIL* 1^2.1203-1205 = *ILS* 7460a-c = *ILLRP* 850.

[24] *CIL* 1^2.1204. On another reading, the text might be translated: "This is the monument of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, baker and contractor – it is obvious!" See Petersen (2003: 249; 2006: 87, n. 13); Ciancio Rossetto (1973: 35–36); Treggiari (1969: 96, n. 6).

[25] Petersen (2006: 108). Grinders and donkeys, as well as other tools of the trade, became common symbols of baking, even without the inclusion of *pistor*; see, for example, the sarcophagus of P. Nonius Zethus, *CIL* 14.393 = Mus. Vat. (Mus. Chiaramonti) Inv. 1343 = Zimmer 25 (Ostia, first century CE).

[26] Curtis (2001: 358–367).

Figure 1 Tomb of Eurysaces; Rome, first century BCE.
Photo: author.

Figure 2 Tomb of Eurysaces, South Frieze, with scenes depicting processing of grain; Rome, first century BCE. Photo: author.

Figure 3 Tomb of Eurysaces, North Frieze, with scenes depicting kneading and baking; Rome, first century BCE.
Photo: author.

Figure 4 Tomb of Eurysaces, West Frieze, with scenes depicting transport and weighing; Rome, first century BCE.
Photo: author.

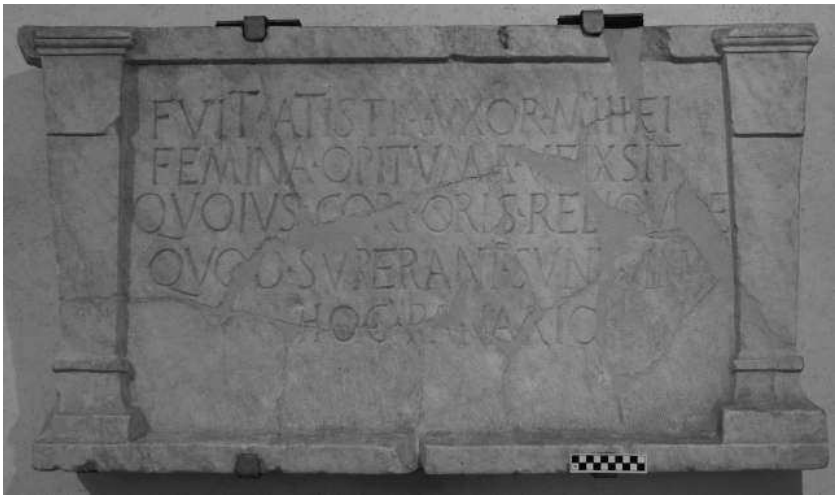

Figure 5 Epitaph of Atistia, possible wife of Eurysaces; Rome, first century BCE. Photo: author, su concessione del Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo – Soprintendenza Speciale per il Colosseo, il Museo Nazionale Romano e l'Area archeologica di Roma.

bread-baking and, at the same time, create a snapshot of an organized bakery at the height of its operations.[27]

The surviving elements of Eurysaces' tomb may have been augmented by a full-length portrait and an additional inscription, both of which were discovered near the site and have been attributed to its damaged eastern face.[28] The portrait represents a togate man and palliate woman standing next to each other, their heads turned inward to show that they are husband and wife.[29] The inscription celebrates a marital bond (fig. 5):[30]

> Fuit Atistia uxor mihei | femina opituma veixsit | quoius corporis reliquiae | quod superant sunt in | hoc panario.
>
> Atistia was my wife, an excellent woman during her lifetime; what remains of her body is in this breadbasket.

Because Atistia's epitaph contains archaisms and a punning reference to a breadbasket, she is often identified as Eurysaces' spouse. However, the

[27] The narrative is interrupted somewhat by the organization of the panels; see Ciancio Rossetto (1973: 41).
[28] Petersen (2006: 92–95) reviews Canina's influential nineteenth-century reconstruction.
[29] Kleiner (1977: 22–25); Petersen (2006: 93).
[30] *CIL* I².1206 = MNR (Terme di Diocleziano) Inv. 72876; Friggeri (2001: 63); De Rosalia (1972: 60).