

Finding Freedmen in Roman Society: Between Agency and Oppression

Panel statement:

Although slave-owning was a common practice throughout the ancient Mediterranean, the Roman system stood out for several reasons, including high rates of manumission and the incorporation of former slaves into the citizen body. This panel is dedicated to exploring new approaches to understanding freed slaves' role in Roman society and culture, a topic which needs to be reevaluated in light of evolving paradigms for the study of marginalized groups (e.g. Bell and Ramsby 2012; Mouritsen 2012). Recent work has stressed the need to engage the "problem of freedom": to conceptualize the freed slave through the more socially encompassing registers of status and class rather than reproducing the binary of freed versus slave passed down from the ancient sources. This work has also pioneered novel strategies for recuperating the freedman's perspective by drawing on non-traditional sources of evidence and by mining cross-cultural data for comparison (Kleijwegt 2006).

We seek to establish a middle ground between interpretations that emphasize subaltern agency at the risk of downplaying the limitations of ex-slaves' freedom, and those that reduce freedmen to mere products of a system of domination without fully appreciating their active contributions to all sectors of Roman society. The category of "the freedman" must also be tested against the variety of statuses and life experiences attributable to this population (e.g., the accuracy of freedmen's conventional designation as "non-elite"). Drawing on an array of literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence, the papers presented by our participants offer examples of current research and make suggestions for future steps we might take in coming to comprehend better this unique, dynamic, and seemingly contradictory component of Roman society.

Proposed program:

1. Introduction (10 mins)

2. Imperial Freedmen's Contributions to the Ideology of Empire (20 mins)

Studies of Roman freedmen tend to focus either on the beliefs and practices of slave-owners or on recovering the freedman's perspective – a bifurcation that risks replicating ancient hierarchies, on the one hand, or downplaying the limits of ex-slaves' freedom, on the other. I attempt to strike a balance between these approaches by examining the exchange of ideas between freedmen and the freeborn ruling orders. As a test case, I consider the ways in which the *familia Caesaris* contributed to the development of imperial ideology. I argue that the emperor's freedmen were active participants in the rise of monarchy, particularly because they modeled for the elite how to negotiate one's relationship to the *princeps*.

3. Municipal Hero as Model: Freedmen and Civic Identity in Herculaneum's *Collegio degli Augustali* (20 mins)

Curiae, temples, and guildhalls fostered the formation of civic communities insofar as these structures were built, decorated, and used over time by specific groups for repeated, ritualized activities. This paper focuses on the Collegio degli Augustali at Herculaneum, the meeting place of the town's Augustales, a municipal group peopled largely by freedmen. It explores how the Augustales shaped the building's sculptural and painted decoration to reflect their own reading of the rhetoric of imperial deification and how the group used municipal iconography to express symbolically to themselves their place within the city.

4. *Permissu Decurionum*: Columbarium Tombs and the Burial Communities of Freedmen (20 mins)

This paper introduces the evidence for collective burial in early Imperial columbarium tombs. It is unknown who constructed these tombs, but the administration and modification of existing structures lay with burial communities that included many freedmen. The egalitarian architectural and epigraphic vocabularies of columbaria suggest that affiliation with these communities was more important than individual distinction. Consequently, my argument characterizes columbaria as sites of social interaction that helped freedmen and other marginalized individuals to overcome exclusion and bereavement. This reconstruction illustrates the agency of freedmen, but their continued relationship with patrons is a reminder that their autonomy had limits.

5. Taking Freedmen out of Context (20 mins)

In this paper I propose the adoption of a comparative perspective as an important and necessary step in gaining a better understanding of slavery in the ancient world. I will illustrate the benefits of such an approach by addressing two issues. I will start by discussing the disadvantages inherent in studying slavery in a single slave society, emphasizing that the drawbacks only become apparent after a comparative approach has been adopted. On a more practical level I will outline how a comparative approach can be of enormous benefit for the study of Roman freedmen.

6. Response (10 mins)

7. Discussion (20 mins)

Works Cited

Bell, S. and T. Ramsby (eds.). 2012. *Free at Last! The Impact of Freed Slaves on the Roman Empire*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Kleijwegt, M. (ed.) 2006. *The Faces of Freedom: The Manumission and Emancipation of Slaves in Old World and New World Slavery*. Leiden: Brill.

Mouritsen, H. 2012. *The Freedman in the Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

August 20, 2012

Dear Members of the CAMWS Selection Committee,

It has recently come to our attention that the word-count requirement of panel proposals was not 800 words for the entire proposal – a limit we had been careful to observe – but rather 800 words for each individual abstract. I cite here the wording on the CAMWS website: “The combined length of the abstract (or panel description) and its list of works cited must not exceed 800 words.” We took this to mean that the whole document must not exceed 800 words and, accordingly, asked our contributors to limit their abstracts to 100 words. Given that the deadline for submission is August 24, it is now too late to ask our colleagues to revise their abstracts.

Despite this misunderstanding, we have gathered together some of the leading scholars in the study of Roman freedmen, as well as emerging voices that will be critical to future developments. Because our abstracts are limited to 100 words each, the depth and sophistication of the research behind them may not be immediately apparent in comparison to other proposals. We respectfully ask that you take this into consideration when you review our submission.

Regards,
The Submitters