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**Slaves and freedmen, Roman and Imperial: Seven background questions and a few tentative answers**

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In this short paper I will try to provide some relevant background information and to problematize a topic (roman slaves and freedmen) that is central to any reconstruction of roman social history, central to the point of having been the subject of an uninterrupted flux of publications, that now count on the dozens of thousands. I will try to focus my attention on some problematic aspects, that are contradictory, or unclear to current scholarship, and to questions that defy easy answers or are simply unanswerable. Drawing a line between what we ought to know, what we would like to know and we may even happen to know with a certain degree of controlled imagination and what is impossible to know would help us better cope with the problem dealt with in the presentation, that is how to read the *lararia* of Hadrian’s Villa, and what to make of what we have on the ground.

**Paragraph 1: What is a roman slave and a roman freedman?** – freedman aka freedperson: *libertus*, *liberta* in Latin: I will use freedmen in this paper since this is the jargon of scholars, implying that I am here referring to both female and male slaves and liberated former male and female slaves-

Roman jurists define a (roman) slave an object (*res*) in private property (*dominium*) of a (roman) citizen. I could go on with this first sentence for pages: let’s ignore here, for sake of brevity and simplicity, that both the concept of private property (*dominium*) and that of roman (slave and slaveowner) are all but unproblematic (and not defined by Romans themselves: Johnson 1999, 53). Let’s stick to that of object (*res*), by far the most important and crucial concept in this line. Being an object means that you, *qua* slave, have no name (just a *cognomen*), neither parents nor fatherland, neither relatives nor brethren, no citizenship, and above all no rights: you can be used and abused by your owner(s), you have to work at their orders, if you get killed nobody will be punished for it, unless your killing has caused economic damage to your owner. But, in this case, the injured person is your owner, not you. If your master is killed, and slaves are suspected for his/her death, the whole servile population belonging to the murdered person (*familia*) will be tortured to death until a truth, whatever truth, will be extorted (technically this is called *quaestio de familia*). And of course, you won’t be asked to testify in a trial, since your voice will have no value. A propos of voice, there are other interesting definitions in ancient literary sources of what a slave is: I like this famous one, for its crudity and simplicity. Varro (a polymath living between 110 and 27 BCE, the leading scholar of his age and a much appreciated intellectual) lists three different kinds of tools one can use for agrarian toils (*r.r.* 1.17): the voiceless one, like a plough, the semivocal one, like the ox, which has a voice but its language is unknown, and the vocal one, the slave, whose voice can even be understood. So, a slave is an *instrumentum vocale*, a speaking tool. Female slaves give birth to home-born slaves (*vernae*), and they can breed them until childhood, but such offspring is of course property of their masters. Male slaves are not even mentioned in our sources with regard to their offspring, since personal status derives from one’s mother. So, a slave father has technically neither rights nor obligations towards his offspring. A slaveowner who has his/her *familia* reproduce itself practices a kind of business called, again technically, *foetura humana*, literally human breeding (see below for its implications).

What does a slave have right to? Three things, the last one absolutely crucial for understanding roman slavery and its social life. Briefly, one: a food allowance distributed daily or weekly or monthly (*alimenta*); two: a shelter (*ergastulum*, *ergastula*, *ergasterion*: there has been huge quantities of ink poured to imagine how chattel slaves could be physically accommodated in Roman villas or urban houses) with some clothes and wares; third: a *peculium*, that is a money allowance that the slave can manage and use at his/her whims, but that is legally property of the master (on legal definitions of *peculium*, Amirante 1983). With such money the slave can conduct businesses of any kinds, enter into transactions with third parties, start-up or continue artisanal activities of any kind, grow financially and eventually ‘buy’ his/her freedom. Social mobility granted to slaves derives almost entirely from the institute of *peculium*, much less from the generosity and humanity of roman slave owners, even though famous slaveholders, like Seneca, ‘sold’ (i.e. advertised) their acts of manumission of slaves as inspired by pure generosity and free humanity (*Ep. ad Luc.*, 42).

Freedmen: who are they? They are former slaves that, through a process of formal liberation, are endowed with a name (a *praenomen* and a *nomen*, almost always that of their former master), gain all civic rights, to the point that they become fully (roman) citizens (*optimo iure*), their offspring born after manumission are free-born (*ingenui*) roman citizens. They suddenly move from a station in which they are nothing and have no rights to another in which they are formally almost on par with their former masters. After the Lex Visellia (allegedly 19 CE), freedmen are no longer allowed to stand for being elected as local magistrates (they enjoy only active political rights, not passive); after the lex Fufia Caninia (2BCE) and Aelia Sentia (4 CE) a ceiling is set for the number of slaves a person can free in his/her testament (no more than 100), whereas a Lex Junia (of uncertain chronology, but quite likely passed in the first two decades of the I c. CE) granted a lesser form of citizenship (the Latin citizenship) to those freedmen who had been liberated without the formalities of roman law and/or below the age of 30. Such laws were enforced to somehow limit the now widespread social phenomenon of massive liberation of slaves, or to draw some sort of line that could make social difference between a freeborn and a freedman visible. But what struck the intelligent non-roman observers, like Philip V in a famous letter sent to the inhabitants of Larisa in 204 BCE, was the very fact that one could suddenly pass from slavery to full citizenship thanks to the enactment of a formal legal act (manumission could happen at the census (*censu*), or through last wills (*testamento*), or by touching the slaves with a rod (*vindicta*) before a roman magistrate whilst the owner pronounces a formula through which the slave gets liberated).

Slaves and freedmen were not recognizable by external physical tracts: unless in chains, slaves could freely roam everywhere, and as long as they had an interest in economically thriving under the roof of their master, they likely had no interests in fleeing or become fugitive; much less so with regards to the freedmen, who tended to remain close to their former masters, to whom they had to pay formal homage and do some mandatory work (*operae*), though, for what we can say, negligeable in terms of quantity and quality.

Slaves and freedmen in roman society originally come from various parts of the inhabited world: mostly abducted from the far north and the regions laying beyond the eastern frontiers of the Empire, there is no hint in our evidence that slaves or freedmen have specific physical features (color of the skin or bodily or physiognomic features that make them identify as slaves). They do enjoy two socially crucially important features: we can say without fear of mistake that slaves (and hence freedmen) were, on average, more literate than the freeborn, and quite likely the most literate social group in roman society together with or after the soldiers (of course besides the elite). How they acquired such ability to read, write and reckon is completely unknown to us: we can surmise that literacy served as a crucial weapon for slaves to enhance their status, gain the trust of their masters, cope with practical matters and cater to their masters in duties less physically demanding or degrading. So, teaching letters and numbers to the youth, the adult or the slave kid within a slave community might have been an astute strategy of communal and individual survival; moreover, we cannot rule out the possibility that some slaveowners encouraged such abilities, or fostered the possibility for their human capital to gain in value, since a literate slave was worth more than a simple harvester or vintager and could be employed in more skilled jobs. Second point, directly a consequence of the first one. Slaves and freedmen bear quite often, in our evidence, the indication of their job, and so we can survey the sheer variety of job titles and occupations: slaves and freedmen are indeed the backbone of urban social life, insofar they are employed in any artisanal, industrial, productive, economic, financial jobs.

**Paragraph Two: Why is roman society a ‘genuine slave society’**?

According to the famous definition of M.I. Finley (1980), Rome was one of the five historically attested ‘genuine slave societies’, i.e. a social organization in which slaves (and freedmen) make up a relevant, fundamental part of the population, without which that society could not function. So, slaves and freedmen were a fundamental component, both quantitively and qualitatively of the Roman Empire, and to paraphrase a famous utterance of a British historian, every time you get around a corner in a Roman source, you bump into a slave. And indeed, slaves are ubiquitous in our evidence. Some revealing figures would prove this point: slaves are discussed in about a quarter of all texts in the Digest and in 28 per cent of the surviving Imperial Constitutions (Morabito 1981, 33-34). Indeed, “there is scarcely a title of the *Digest* in which he (the slave) does not figure.” (Crook 1967, 55; also Schiavone 2020).

It has been calculated that 75% of the burial inscriptions of Rome, Ostia and Puteoli pertain to slaves and freedmen, clearly overrepresented with regard to their actual number (Mouritsen 2004). The actual number, however, cannot be known in any precise way. It has been hypothesized that no more than 10% of the Egyptian population in the High imperial period is a slave or freed population, and that estimate is based on census declarations that are available to us on papyri (Bagnall and Frier 1994). It is impossible to guesstimate the servile population in any point in time and space of the Roman Empire: it is however certain that from mid II c. BCE to early III c. CE, the central centuries of Roman history, slaves and freedmen were omnipresent. There might have changed the source of supply though, hence the social matrix of such slaves (Harris 1999). In the earlier period slaves must have been mostly the booty of imperialistic conquests; when conquests slowed down, slaves arrived through supply lines created by slave merchants who bought them beyond the borders of the Empire. Or through home breeding, by having slave family reproduce themselves; or, in smaller numbers, by means of child-exposure. Finally, one of the most surprising forms, at least to us, of making new slaves is the widespread phenomenon of self-enslavement. Some freeborn, actually a good number of them, might prefer entering slavery by mutual agreement with a prospective master, and conduct business as slave under conditions that were more favorable than those (s)he would have attained as *ingenu-a/us*, since a slave is shielded by the very fiction that he is not liable and responsible for any of his actions, as he is a piece of property of his master. Self-enslavement and slaves that had been freeborn must have been quite spread out in the *familia Caesaris*, as we will see below, for the enormous opportunities to financial and social gains available to slaves in the imperial administration (on all this, Cohen, forthcoming).

So, slaves in the imperial period were quite possibly more socially selected than in previous, republican times, and a good number of them had a past as freeborn; equally, freedmen were ubiquitous since liberating a slave had become a widespread social practice, something that a slave could expect and to some extent obtain by means of the moneys made with their semi-independent activities.

Crude, brutish and dim as reality and its representation might have been, we should be prepared to read such social phenomena in much more nuanced way: being a slave meant, in many respects, faring better than the average poor freeborn; being a freedman was a sign of an upward social path, meant being a social climber, someone who made it. Agency, which is the fundamental concept we will try to explore below (Abatino and Dari Mattiacci, 2011 and 2020) is something accessible to slaves and freedmen: a large number of them acted according to a behavioral pattern largely independent from their masters’ and former masters’ will.

This is one of the major contradictions we have to face: with regards to roman slavery, we have to use various categories. This is something that was patently clear to roman jurists: Ulpian (the most important jurisprudent of antiquity, leaving and working in the first two decades of the III c.) writes, quite surprisingly, “one must close one's eyes” (*oculis coniventibus*) to the clear incompatibility between legal recognition of a slave's ownership of assets in his *peculium* and legal insistence that slaves, *qua* slaves, had no capacity to own anything (*Dig.* 40.1.4 pr.-1, where Ulpian reports an *epistula divorum fratrum*, to which the expression of ‘closing one’s eyes’ might be attributed as well). Thus “the Roman “legal fiction” is the factual falsity of the juridical framework governing slaves' business activity, and the casuistry through which Roman jurisprudents skillfully preserved a legal framework seemingly confirming a fictitious world in which slaves are absolute nullities, while simultaneously creating legal methodologies and rules facilitating a commercial reality utterly in conflict with the fundamental juridical precepts that should have governed servile business activity” (Cohen, forthcoming).

A free person entering into slavery voluntarily under contractual provisions negotiated with a future master is not without legal rights. Even servile “knowledge” could constitute a form of power. Money, skills, insights, personal relations with important individuals (“patrons”), positions in government, contractual rights: “Power is everywhere . . . and comes from everywhere.” “How important was the question of free birth really to the common Roman, when confronted with other factors such as wealth and influence?” (Bruun 1990, 284). This is a crucial question, unanswerable in detail, though very important and it brings us directly into the imperial court.

**Paragraph Three: What kind of slave and freedman is a slave and a freedman of a Roman Emperor?**

According to a well-established scholarly opinion, imperial slaves and freedmen, named collectively but slightly improperly *familia Caesaris*, are the aristocracy of roman slaves and freedmen (Weaver 1972; Boulvert 1970 and 1974). First of all, this social group, i.e. slaves and ex slaves that are bound to the person of the Emperor by a relationship of private law, since they belong or have belonged to him, tends to act as a unit, and to be visible in our evidence as a discrete social unit. Briefly, slaves and ex slaves act socially and perform social acts as collective bodies held together by their very belonging or serving or having belonged to the Emperor. If they perform something as a group, they do it *qua* slaves and freedmen of the Emperor.

We can read some 4000 inscriptions mentioning members of the *familia Caesaris* (mostly burial inscriptions, mostly from Rome and its environs, dated between the Augustan age and mid-III c. CE: afterwards they disappear altogether from the inscriptional record: see Eck 2005), which make them the second largest social unit in the Empire, after Roman soldiers. They are overrepresented in our record, and what has been already said above about the visibility of slaves and freedmen in general is all the more valid with regards to imperial slaves and freedmen. We know from a hint in Fronto that slaves and freedmen advanced in their career according to a schedule that combined seniority and expertise (“ex forma suo loco et iusto tempore”, *ad M. Caes.* 5.52 van den Hout), and tended to stay in the same field where they had served, of had given proof of their abilities. Basically, every aspect of roman public life (from public finances to spectacles, from coinage to imperial correspondence, from writing public speeches to organizing the daily schedule of the Emperor) was managed, organized, crafted by his *familia*, by some dozens of thousands slaves and ex-slaves. This was, to a certain extent, a group of election, and in fact we do have primary evidence regarding freeborn that joined the imperial court by applying to become imperial slaves (POxy 46.3312). It was, moreover, a group on which the whole functioning of the complex imperial government and its daily activities rested. Clerical, and subclerical tasks remained the absolute domain of the *familia Caesaris*. What made this group seem a sort of aristocracy or privileged group, despite the social stigma attached to their personal status, was 1. Proximity to the center of the Empire, the body of the Emperor, the power in the Empire; 2. Access to otherwise unattainable opportunities to enrich oneself through the management of imperial resources, through briberies and robberies of any kinds. Power is at stake here, either directly, since an imperial slave can, at least in theory, communicate with his master at any time, something not even imaginable to the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Empire, or indirectly, through money, or through both.

**Paragraph Four: What do we know of the kind of relationship between Emperors and their slaves and freedmen?**

This is an obscure topic: we don’t know how Emperors recruited their servile manpower, how they selected them, whether they expressed their opinions in promoting or advancing their staff’s career. Probably, no more than a hundredth of imperial slaves and freedmen were known personally to the Emperor, and just a fraction of those hundredth had ready access to his body, despite everybody in the *familia Caesaris* could boast a direct relationship with the Emperor. This is of course both correct and an overt exaggeration. Forms of control within the chain of command of Imperial government or administration can be only vaguely reconstructed: slaves are usually organized in centuries under the order of a *vilicus* (slave at the head of other slaves); some procuratorships, posts available to freedmen at the age of 40 or more, must have had important functions of control and management of large crowds of slaves and freedmen. We don’t know the extent to which Emperors were aware of the number and reasons for which his slaves were manumitted. There was a special account, among the many accounts that ramified from the central bureau of the treasury, called *fiscus libertatis et peculiorum*, something that collected moneys with which imperial slaves paid their own freedom through their *peculium*. So, manumission must have been a social practice probably more spread out among imperial slaves than among slaves of private people.

The Emperor was, in theory, nothing more than a princeps, that is the first one among his peers. He managed and governed the Empire with the aid of his *familia*, which was by size, but only by size, different, i.e. larger than that of any other among his peers. Again, here legal fiction masks a blatant lie, and the Emperor is indeed a monarch and his government a sort of monarchy. But such monarchy grew out of a compromise made between Augustus and the Senate. His *familia* served as his staff, managed according to the rules that were typical of the relationship between masters and slaves and ex slaves, based on mutual trust built around a vertical and asymmetric division of tasks. So, patriarchy and patronizing attitudes are at the core of such relationship. Slaves and ex slaves have to pay respect and homage to their master, and this very act of bowing before the Emperor had, as always happens in Antiquity, its religious dimension.

**Paragraph Five: To what extent is the social life of imperial slaves and freedmen part of various ways of organizing social life for slaves and freedmen in general? How do they associate themselves?**

As mentioned above, the *familia Caesaris* is visible in our written evidence as a group that performs acts of social significance (for example ritual acts), and associates itself in forms of self-organized, self-constituted associations (*koinà*, pl. of *koinon* in Greek; *corpora*, *collegia*, pl. of respectively *corpus* and *collegium* in Latin). There is, as far as we can say, no difference whatsoever between cultic associations of private worshippers, associations of artisans and merchants that perform the same job or deal with the same kind of transactions, or persons, like the members of the *familia Caesaris* who do something together according to a schedule of activities or a set of rules that has been decided and written down in a chart. Membership to such associations is usually subject to a payment of a fee and fees flow onto a communal treasury, with which paying communal expenses (typically the animals and the instruments for performing sacrifices and rites). The group so constituted elects its own representatives, has its patrons, bestows honors and prizes within and outside the circle of its members, and performs some important social and economic functions (for example the *corpus* can take care of the burial of its members, offer services to the non-literate, but also is the natural venue where apprenticeship for the youth can be organized, secrets about techniques and practice can be kept and transmitted, prices about merchandise or services can be communicated, trust and credit of third parties can be verified and so on). The *corpus* or *koinon* is a small city within the city, and not by chance, the first Christian communities organized themselves as *koina*. The *familia Caesaris* makes no exception: there are associations of members of the *familia* under the superintendency of a *vilicus* that are locally based (for example in a villa or other imperial vast properties); or of members of the *familia* that work in the same building, or are busied in the same sector (for example the *tres cohortes* of the Horrea Galbana in Rome).

So, slaves and freedmen of the Emperor organize internally their social life, for what we can say from our all-but-complete evidence, exactly in the same way other slaves and freedmen do. Every association has to obtain a formal permit to constitute itself, a permit that is originally a *Senatusconsultum*, and lately an imperial decision: the official wording is: *corpus quod ex SC coire licet*: ‘an association whose permit to, literally, get together (*coire*) was bestowed through a decision of the Senate.’ Obviously, the *familia Caesaris* had absolutely no problems in obtaining such permits.

**Paragraph Six: Why is religious life of this social class important, relevant and visible, and what can we make out of it?**

Like any other slaves and freedmen, imperial slaves and freedmen had the obligation to pay religious homage to their masters, performing rites to the *Lares Augusti* (the deities protecting the household, in this case the imperial household, and whose cult is ubiquitous in the roman world), or any other cult associated to the person (*genius Augusti*) or to the family (*domus Augusta*) of the reigning Emperors, or to the deified Emperors (imperial cult proper, *divus Augustus*, *divus Claudius*, *divus Vespasianus* etc.) or to any god somehow associated with the Emperors and their family members (*Hercules Augustus*, *Silvanus Augustus*, *Diana Augusta*, *Cerer Augusta* etc.) and so on. Dedications can be voted and rites performed for special occasions: upon imperial return, for their bliss, salvation and good fortune, for their birthday, for special occasions in their lives (ceremonies for anniversaries of victories, triumphs or for their first day as Emperors). There is nothing exceptional in the variety of occasions that gave rise to religious acts by members of the *familia Caesaris*: it is indeed interesting noting that members of the *familia Caesaris* perform rites and celebrate cultic acts that have no difference to other social groups or classes, but the sheer number of documents pertaining to them is higher than that of any other social group, again with the exception of the soldiers. Still badly understudied, the religiosity of the members of the *familia Caesaris*, and of imperial slaves is interesting exactly because this group epitomizes in their daily activities whatever was performed in the outer world. There is a degree of uniformity in such religious landscape of acts of homage towards imperial power whose ultimate cause is indeed the very fact that patriarchy and patronizing vertical relations is at the basis of any social interaction between each group or class in the Empire and the Emperor. So, the imperial slave and the imperial freedman, *qua* bound to the Emperor by a stronger tie of private law, epitomize whatever binding relations were present in Roman society between freeborn individuals and the imperial power. To a certain extent, everybody in the Roman society depends on or serves the Emperor, as imperial slaves do. Let me go back to the final question of paragraph two: I cited another scholar’s question: ‘How important was the question of free birth really to the common Roman, when confronted with other factors such as wealth and influence?’ A slave of Caesar was (or could easily be) richer and wield more influence and power than an average freeborn roman citizen or resident alien (*peregrinus*). So, such group was easily targeted as a prominent one, one whose visibility and pervasiveness epitomized imperial presence and power in any corners of the Roman Empire.

**Paragraph sever: Last, seventh question, indeed the first to start with: why is Paul., *Phil.* 4.22 preaching to the slaves of Caesar’s household?**

The *Kaisaros oikia*, whose saints, *hosioi*, or believers, Paul preaches in the letter to the Philippians (4.22) is actually one of the earliest literary mentions of the *familia Caesaris*, and of course one of the most revealing and important. What matters most in this paper is not to delve into the many obscure points of this passage and of the letter: still uncertain whether it was written from Ephesus, before Romans and after Corinthians, as many exegetes believe, so in the forties, and why this group of believers is the only one cited in this letter has remained and will remain obscure and subject to speculation. Nevertheless, something can be said: the members of the *familia Caesaris* stand out as an easily identifiable group whose relevance in the roman colony of Philippi (in Macedonia) is such that are worth a mention. There might have been Judaizing slaves or simply imperial slave who were Jews that served the Emperor in Philippi, as accountants or managers of imperial properties there, or as publicans of the local duty-station, or as local tax collectors. Or in whatever other imperial activity in Philippi still unknown to us. What is interesting is that that group was worth a special mention, as something that enjoyed social visibility. Inferring from that passage that Christians had already reached the core of the Empire, and were already infiltrated in the imperial court, as an almost unanimous tradition of studies, mostly apologetic, has done, is going way too far. Paul knows that some of his readers are indeed members of the *Kaisaros oikia*, and so he can name them by their collective identity. Their religious activities might have been those of any other members of the *familia Caesaris*, and we are here able to capture a glimpse of an interesting phenomenon of social change: slaves and freedmen serving the Emperor in an important though not central place of the Empire, whose cultural matrix was in flux, maybe Judaizing, maybe Hellenized Jews of the diaspora (like Paul), or from other cultural stems, who had shown interest in the preaching of a co-religionary or of a man of wisdom, evidently known to some of them and whose name and deeds circulated in their social circle, in their small group. Indeed, the hint in Paul’s letter confirms what we have discussed so far: the *familia Caesaris* is an extremely interesting study subject for its social visibility and for it epitomizes roman society at large (on all this, Flexsenhar 2019).

Slaves and freedmen of the Emperor, in this case of Nero, are the protagonists of the late II c. Passio of Paul as we read it in the Acta Vercellensia. Pre-eminence of members of the *familia Caesaris* in this early legend of the death of Paul seems to derive from Paul’s hint at the *kaisaros oikia* in *Phil.*, 4.22. And again, imperial slaves welcome Paul in Rome and one freedman betrays him to the Emperor. They are, indeed, protagonists of the story exactly because they surround the Emperor, and their religious life is visible to everybody. Paul is captured and brought before the Emperor to be killed.

We should start from here, from this legendary episode that the tradition locates in the Roman suburbs, along the *via Ostiensis*, in imperially owned land, where later a Basilica of Saint Paul will be erected, to start ruminating about imperial *lararia* in imperial places.

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