

FREED PERSONS AND WORK IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE. AN APPROACH BASED ON EPIGRAPHIC DOCUMENTATION

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Abstract

This article examines mentions of work activities in inscriptions related to people of servile origin in the Roman Empire. After presenting Cicero's disparaging view of work expressed by in his *De Officiis*, we examined epigraphic documents from the 1st century A.D. with the aim of ascertaining how freed persons perceived and experienced their occupations. We argue that freed persons' emphasis on their work activities constituted an attempt to regain a public identity despite all social prejudices arising from slavery.

Keywords

Freed persons; Work; Roman slavery; Latin Epigraphy.

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Resumo

Este artigo examina as menções às atividades laborais nas inscrições relacionadas às pessoas de origem servil no Império Romano. Após apresentarmos a visão depreciativa sobre o trabalho manifestada por Cícero em seu *De Officiis*, recorreremos à documentação epigráfica do século I d.C. com o objetivo de averiguarmos as percepções e usos que as pessoas egressas da servidão faziam de suas respectivas ocupações. Nesta empreitada, argumentamos que sua ênfase nas atividades laborais constituía uma tentativa de reaver uma identidade pública para além de todos os preconceitos sociais advindos da escravidão.

Palavras-chave

Libertos; Trabalho; Escravidão Romana; Epigrafia Latina.

Introduction

Work is a dated concept, like all others. Nothing indicates the existence of such a notion during millions of years of hunting and gathering. The same can be said of societies that until today ignore this concept, like many indigenous, aboriginal or native ones. Work or terms like labor, in different languages, are often associated with suffering. Work designated torture itself. Labor also carried this loaded connotation of something painful and forced. These negative connotations derive from class societies, in which some suffer and produce while others enjoy and consume. A few enjoy their leisure (*otium*, in Latin), many others lack enjoyment (*negotium*, no leisure). Capitalism, since the 18th century, has been shaping new facets into work as a concept. If the distinctions between workers and others used to be founded on symbolic aspects and legal and social status, capitalism has introduced the very abstract concept of work, so well-studied by Marx (2013) and Engels.

Neoliberalism and the concept of Human Capital have reshaped the approach to this topic, though without removing altogether the negative aspects associated with the concept, on the contrary (Brown, 2016). Everyone is urged to leave work, to become capital, to stop being a worker (*Arbeit*, the sufferer), to be the entrepreneur (*Arbeitsgeber*, the one who gives work, or suffering, to others). Since the late 18th century, the visibility given to the value of work by social movements have contributed, even if involuntarily, to reinforce the value of suffering, to the detriment of the enjoyment of life (De Masi, 1999).

It is no surprise, therefore, the negative connotation given in all class societies to suffering as a requirement for survival. In antiquity, with slavery and other forms of submission or dependence, this was evident and distinctive. The particularity was in a differentiation based on legal and social status (Hope, 2005), since there were numerous distinctions based on extra-economic criteria, in the modern and capitalist sense of the term. This might seem strange to the modern reader of the ancients, as we will show later in this article. What mattered was not to accumulate, earn money, become human capital, but rather to be honored, among other things, for not having to suffer with vulgar work. This perception was not universally shared, however; in particular, it was not embraced by those who, with their efforts, dedication, work and, why not, suffering, had accomplished to enjoy a certain leisure. The freedmen are a good example of this, which is the central argument of this article. Without disregarding the pains incurred, we emphasize the other side, the valorization of action

in the world, as demonstrated by some of those who, having suffered the worst forms of submission, managed to make some space for enjoying life.

Cicero and the vulgar occupations

Among the many ancient texts that show us the Romans' contempt for manual work, *De Officiis* by Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC - 43 BC) is one of the most well-known and cited expositions on the subject. Unable to complete his trip to Athens to visit his son Marcus, Cicero wrote *De Officiis*, most probably in the year 44 BC (Dyck, 1996: 2). Unlike Cicero's philosophical texts, *De Officiis* is an instructional work that presents a collection of moral precepts concerning the duties and responsibilities to be observed by his son (Dyck, 1996: 12-5; Lintott, 2008: 369) and by all youngsters interested in securing a prestigious social position (Chiappetta, 1999: XXXIX). Based on the work of Panaetius of Rhodes (c.180 BC - 109 BC), *De Officiis* examines in Latin what, in Greek, was represented by the word καθήκον/καθήκοντα, which means the appropriate action, the rational and moral duty to be observed by people (Dyck, 1996: 2-3). Etymology indicates the meaning of "to reach a point" and the current translation in modern languages, "duties," covers some aspects of the term.

In a well-known excerpt from *De Officiis* (1,150), Cicero divided and classified activities into two main types: on the one hand, there are works associated with the arts, techniques and the intellect. Considered superior, these activities would be worthy and appropriate for freeborn people. On the other hand, the forms of work designated as *operae* would be unworthy and close to servitude. In this sense, for Cicero, working in small retail businesses, as well as the work of fishermen (*piscatores*), cooks (*coqui*), butchers (*lanii*), fish vendors (*cetarii*) and sausage makers (*fartores*) would be a mark of indignity and servitude:

Illiberales autem et sordidi quaestus mercennariorum omnium, quorum operae, non quorum artes emuntur; est enim in illis ipsa merces auctoramentum servitutis.

Unbecoming to a gentleman, too, and vulgar are the means of livelihood of all hired workmen whom we pay for mere manual labour, not for artistic skill; for in their case the very wages they receive is a pledge of their slavery. (Cicero, *De Officiis*: 1.150. Translated by Walter Miller, 1913).

The acceptance (or not) of Cicero's precepts among his contemporaries remains uncertain. For Finley (1986: 68), the commentaries of the Roman lawyer and philosopher are compatible with praising agricultural work to

the detriment of paid occupations, associated with economic dependence, and of activities aimed at profit and usury. His point of view, thus, echoed a strong statement by Cato the Elder:

Est interdum praestare mercaturis rem quaerere, nisi tam periculosum sit et item fenerari, si tam honestum sit. Maiores nostri sic habuerunt et ita in legibus posiverunt, furem dupli condemnari, feneratorem quadrupli; quanto peiorem civem existimarent fenatorem quam furem, hinc licet existimare. Et virum bonum quom laudabant, ita laudabant: bonum agricolam bonumque colonum; amplissime laudari existimabatur qui ita laudabatur. Mercatorem autem strenuum studiosumque rei quaerendae existimo, verum ut supra dixi periculosum et calamitosum; at ex agricolis et viri fortissimi et milites strenuissimi gignuntur, maximeque pius quaestus stabilissimusque consequitur minimeque invidiosus, minimeque male cogitantes sunt qui in eo studio occupati sunt.

It is true that to obtain money by trade is sometimes more profitable, were it not so hazardous; and likewise money-lending, if it were as honourable. Our ancestors held this view and embodied it in their laws, which required that the thief be mulcted double and the usurer fourfold; how much less desirable a citizen they considered the usurer than the thief, one may judge from this. And when they would praise a worthy man their praise took this form: "good husbandman, good farmer"; one so praised was thought to have received the greatest commendation. The trader I consider to be an energetic man, and one bent on making money; but, as I said above, it is a dangerous career and one subject to disaster. On the other hand, it is from the farming class that the bravest men and the sturdiest soldiers come, their calling is most highly respected, their livelihood is most assured and is looked on with the least hostility, and those who are engaged in that pursuit are least inclined to be disaffected. (Cato. *De Agri Cultura*: pr.1. Translated by W. D. Hooper and H. B. Ash. Loeb Classical Library, 1934)

The perception of the work performed by freed men and women, however, has been assessed from a different perspective to that embraced by Cicero, Cato and others. This hypothesis was defended by Sandra Joshel (1992) in her study *Work, identity and legal status at Rome: a study of occupational inscriptions*. For Joshel, the inscriptions and iconographic representations with explicit references to the occupations of ex-slaves are an attempt to register their social importance through the jobs they performed:

Further, slaves' occupational titles may proceed from a perception of their social value, one that originates, ironically, in social poverty and natal alienation. Work of all kinds, especially the domestic jobs held by many of the slaves in the occupational inscriptions, was not a source of prestige in the ideology of the highest ranks of the freeborn. (...). Work carried with it a sense of importance. The predominance of slaves and ex-slaves among those who identified themselves as the producers of goods and services seems to bespeak slaves' awareness of the worth of their activities (Joshel, 1992: 55)

Since the condition of slaves in the Roman world showed great diversity and variability (Bradley, 1994: 4), ancient documents show them in the most varied urban and rural occupations. Besides the heterogeneity of the professions practiced by people of servile origin and their respective daily work, the inscriptions (mainly funeral) also present information on how they managed the relationship with their respective masters in view of the possibility of manumission. Below, we present some examples in order to clarify these characteristics.

The work of freed persons in latin inscriptions

Ancient texts present points of view restricted to the limited circle of the ruling class. Cicero, like other ancient authors whose works survived to this day, had studied Greek philosophy: his treatises are sophisticated elaborations and do not even represent the point of view of an elite Roman who followed the common religion. First, there were divergent philosophical currents and, next, an ordinary member of the wealthy classes usually was not acquainted with erudite matters. On the contrary, there was even resistance to the study of Greek culture, as attested by the Cato's passage above, in praise of the good, simple farmer. It would thus be difficult to assess how valued, in general, were intellectual activities (*artes*), those who combine (*ars*) action and reflection, in comparison with the *operae*, which are the efforts, the daily work, but also the free time to do what you want, as in Plautus, aimed at a wider audience. Therefore, it is advised to read the literary references against the grain (Löwy, 2010). Cicero, in his philosophical work, turned to a smaller and more affluent audience, Plautus was already writing to more humble people and the same word *operae* therefore receives very different meanings.

Then there is the vast and ever-increasing amount of information obtained from archaeological studies of material culture (Funari, 2006). Material sources do not refer only to the literate elites, on the contrary, even the inscriptions reached the illiterate through the oral reading prevalent in the ancient world. Archeology has been making it possible to contrast, in particular, normative and prescriptive discourses, as in Cicero's or Seneca's treatises, with what is found in parietal paintings, in the iconography in lamps or decorated vases, in the statuary, among other surfaces and objects. The archaeological study of the ancient world has been more and more taken into account not only by the field of Ancient History, but also by other disciplines, such as the study of ancient languages and literature or the religious studies. Inscriptions are especially

promising for the study of the ancient subjectivities of subordinates, whether in the form of graffiti (Funari, 2012) or commissioned epigraphs, such as gravestones. Graffiti is abundant only, and exceptionally, in Pompeii, while the others are found everywhere. Even when commissioned, they can reveal the points of view both of those who ordered them and of the target audience, the passersby (Funari, 2018).

The study of freedmen, ex-slaves who gained freedom, although going back to the beginnings of academic historiography in the 19th century, was renewed by approaches derived from social theory and cultural studies (Silva, 2021, no prelo). In the first case, concepts such as hybridity (Hardt & Negri 2000: 60; 166-7), transculturation, cultural mix, miscegenation, multilingualism, female agency, fluidity or agency contributed to understanding the ancient Roman world under new perspectives. Cultural studies then introduced notions such as post-colonialism or popular cultures, which have been increasingly applied to the study of antiquity, producing unexpected results (Funari & Garraffoni, 2018). In this article, we examine some inscriptions in the light of these theoretical discussions. It is best to start with an epigraph that brings together several of these issues:

Psamate Furiae/ ornatrix v(ixit) a(nnos) XIIX/ Mithrodates pistor/ Flacci Thori fecit

(CIL VI, 09732).

Location: Rome. **Date:** 01-25 A.D.

Psamate, domestic servant of Furiae, lived for nineteen years. Mithrodates, Thorius Flaccus' baker made [this sepulcher]. (Our translation).

This funerary inscription (CIL VI, 09732) allows us to observe that the job performed, together with the person's name itself, was used as a form of social identification for those who have experienced servitude. When we note that both individuals died still in servitude, we can assume that manumission was not available to all enslaved people. The word *ornatrix/-ces*, derived from the verb *orno*, refers to the idea of "preparing, readying, equipping and organizing." It also means "to decorate," "to embellish" and "to adorn;" functions common to the *ornatrices* of imperial Roman times (Ernout & Meillet, 2001: 468-9). In Portuguese, we opted to translate it as *mucama* (female domestic servant), a name used in the black slavery of Portuguese America and Africa, because we recognize similarities in the work of these enslaved women, especially in their job of performing domestic services in the most intimate spaces of the manor house. The

mention of occupations as a form of social identification of slaves and freedmen, in fact, can be observed in numerous other Roman inscriptions:

Ancaeus / Hilarionis tonsor / annor(um) XXVIII

(CIL VI, 01228 = CIL X, 01963).

Location: Rome. **Date:** 01-50 A.D.

Ancaeus, Hilarion's barber, twenty-eight years old (Our translation).

The use of a single name of Greek origin, as well as the fact that no filiation is mentioned, leaves no doubt as to the servile condition of the slave Ancaeus (CIL VI, 01228 = CIL X, 01963), who dedicated himself to the occupation of being Hilarion's barber until the end of his life, without, however, having obtained his manumission. The funerary inscription shows that occupation serves as a complement to the identification of this individual.

Adrastus / libertus / cocus / Sophe / Adrasti / coci / l(iberta) uxor

(CIL VI, 09263 = CIL IX, *00427).

Location: Rome. **Date:** 1st century BC

Adrastus, freedman and cook. Sophe, Adrastus' cook, freedwoman and wife. (Our translation).

Although the inscription mentions that both individuals are freed persons, it seems that Sophe had been Adrastus' slave: once freed, she also became the "wife" of her *patronus*. Because they were not *ingenui*, formal marriage was a civil right interdicted to them. In this case, all indicates that they would have resorted to *contubernium*: an unofficial conjugal association that could only be practiced with the consent of the slaves' owner. Regardless of this impediment, the use of *uxor* (wife) in the inscription attests that these freed persons their considered involvement a true marriage (Funari & Garraffoni, 2008). Both were cooks: one of the vulgar occupations according to Cicero in his *De Officiis* (1,150).

The occupation of an ex-slave as a fisherwoman and fish vendor was recorded in an inscription made on an intriguing funerary artifact, which mentions Aurelia Nais and other freedmen who worked with her. This inscription presents information that makes us even wonder if the

character mentioned in Juvenal's *Satires*³ would be the same person we know through the inscription:

Aurelia C(ai) l(iberta) Nais / piscatrix de horreis Galbae / C(aius) Aurelius C(ai)
l(ibertus) Phileros / patronus / L(ucius) Valerius L(uci) l(ibertus) Secundus

(CIL VI, 09801).

Location: Rome. **Date:** A.D. 69-80

Aurélia Náis, Caius' freedwoman, fisherwoman from Galba's warehouses. Patron Caius Aurelius Phileros, Caius' freedman. Lucius Valerius Secundus, Lucius' freedman (Our translation).



Image 1: Detail of the funerary altar of the freedwoman and fish vendor Aurelia Nais. Rome, 1st century AD. **Dimensions:** 83.5 cm (Height) x 63.8 cm (Width). **Photo:** Manfred Clauss, Epigraphik Datenbank Clauss/Slaby.

As in other cases, Aurelia Nais' inscription specifies the job performed by her and other freed individuals. This epigraphic record also evidences other complex characteristics of Roman slavery: Caius Aurelius Phileros occupies, at the same time, the position of freedman and of patron of other

³ JUVENAL. *Satires*. 1. V, 92-98. "Mullus erit domini, quem misit Corsica vel quem Tauromenitae rupes, quando omne peractum est et iam defecit nostrum mare, dum gula saevit, retibus adsiduis penitus scrutante macello proxima, nec patimur Tyrrhenum crescere piscem, instruit ergo focum provincia, sumitur illinc quod captator emat Laenas, Aurelia vendat".

freedmen. Regarding the use of visual elements, the altar features a laurel wreath, used by Greeks and Romans in the representations of victorious deities, military leaders and poets. Its use in funerary monuments, we presume, could be alluding to the idea of victory over death.

In addition to written records, images and representations referring to the occupation of freed persons can also be seen in several funerary monuments belonging to this social group. An example of this is the tomb of the ex-slaves Caius Cafurnius Antiochus and Veturia Deutera:

C(aius) Cafurnius / C(ai) l(ibertus) Antiochus / lanarius / Veturia C(ai) l(iberta) / Deutera / monumentum / fecit sibi et l(ibertis) su{e}is / in fro(n)te p(edes) XV in a(gro) p(edes) XX (CIL VI, 09489).

Location: Rome. **Date:** 1st century AD.

Caius Cafurnius Antiochus, wool worker, Caius' freedman. Veturia Deutera, Caius' freedwoman, made this monument for herself and her freedmen. The grave measures fifteen feet at the front, and its depth is twenty feet. (Our translation).

According to Duprat (2017: 124), the individuals mentioned in the inscription could be a couple. The reference to the right-hand handshake, *dextrarum iunctio*, in the context of conjugal union, in this case by *contubernium*, could be representing an association involving mutual benefit and respect. Caius Cafurnius Antiochus' work as wool producer (*lanarius*) is represented (Image 2) by the image of a sheep, seen to the left of the tombstone.



Image 2: Gravestone of Caius Cafurnius Antiochus and Veturia Deutera. Rome, 1st century AD. **Photo:** Manfred Clauss Epigraphik Datenbank.

Recurring in numerous studies of Roman Archeology and Art History (Petersen, 2003; Zanker, 2010), the tomb of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces constitutes, perhaps, the best-known example of an allusion to an occupation engraved in a funerary monument of an individual of servile origin. In order to perpetuate the memory of his economic success, a result of his professional activity (Zanker, 2010: 145), Eurysaces recorded his work as a baker in his epitaph (CIL VI, 01958A) and in the upper frieze of his tomb. In the three remaining façades of the monument, images of bread making (Image 3) further emphasize his professional activity. For Petersen (2003: 246-7), moreover, the side decoration of the monument with circular elements would have a format similar to the objects and machinery used in bread making. The monument's inscriptions tell us that:

[Est hoc monume]ntum Marcei Vergilei Eurysacis pistoris redemptoris apparet //

Est hoc mon<i=u>mentum Margei Vergili Eurysacis/ pistoris redemptoris apparet //

Est hoc monumentum Marci Vergili Eurysac[is]

(CIL VI, 01958A)

This is the monument of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, baker, supplier, bailiff.

This is the monument of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces, baker and bailiff.

This is the monument of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces.

(Our translation)



Image 3: Detail of the tomb of Marcus Vergilius Eurysaces depicting scenes of bread making. **Photo:** Wikimedia Commons.

Uncovered during the works undertaken by Pope Gregory XVI between 1838 and 1839, the tomb of Eurysaces was found in the vicinity of the *Porta Maggiore* (Petersen, 2003: 232. n.11; n.12). In addition to the funerary monument, two marble statues depicting a man and a woman, identified as representations of the baker and his wife, were also found in the same

excavation together with a funerary inscription⁴ dedicated to a woman named Atistia. Recorded in archaic writing similar to that used in the tomb of the baker Eurysaces, the inscription in this gravestone suggests that the burial of her remains would have occurred in a breadbasket (*panarium*).

Unlike other inscriptions mentioning freed persons, which are recognizable as such due to the use of terms and abbreviations such as 'L(*ibertus*)', 'L(*iberta*)', 'LIB(*erta*)' LIB(*ertus*), in Eurysaces' tomb there is no explicit mention that he is a freedman: his condition, thus, has been surmised based on the absence of filiation in the inscription, on his name of Greek origin and on the references to his profession (Petersen, 2003: 238). Even more telling is the presence of his *tria nomina*, a signal that allows us to know that the baker was a Roman citizen. His occupation as an *apparitor* or bailiff, an administrative assistant of importance, moreover, highlights his social condition through his professional activity.

Conclusion

Ten years ago, Glaydson José da Silva (2010: 104) already made the observation that “*research in Ancient History in Brazil, today, is aligned in many cases with the most innovative work being done in centers of excellence abroad.*” One of the aspects to be emphasized is the study of subordinates, past and present (and vice versa). The recent publication of an article on this issue by Júlio César Magalhães de Oliveira (2020), highlighted in a reference history journal, attests to the universal relevance of the Brazilian social and academic experience. Social because the secular experience of slavery and its legacy continues to torment and to lead all Brazilians, and scholars in particular, to reflect on social issues.

Slavery (Joly, 2019), poverty (Faversani, 1998), freedmen (Gonçalves, 1998; 2000) or the people (Funari, 1987) show the vividness of the Brazilian social experience to put the past into question. Added to these concerns are others of equal importance, with emphasis on female agency, in the present and in the past (Funari, 1995; Cavicchioli, 2003; Feitosa, 2003; Belo, 2020), as in this article. In this, too, the local social and academic agency was important, with due emphasis given to female agency (Rago, 2019). In this article, we sought to conduct a case study in order to explore both aspects,

⁴ CIL VI, 01958b: Fuit A(n)tistia uxor mih{e}i / femina op[[i]]t<i=u>ma v{e}ix{s}it / quouis corporis reliquiae / quod(!) superant sunt in / hoc panario. “Atistia was my wife. She lived as a wonderful woman, the remains of whose body which survive are in this breadbasket” (Petersen, 2003: 233).

which were already present since the study of Ancient History began to be renewed in the 1980s, in Brazil and around the world. In Brazil, these were years of struggles for democracy and coexistence, for justice in the face of oppression and arbitrary rule. Decades later much was achieved, but new challenges emerge: xenophobia, racism, sexism, contempt for the excluded and for life, necrophilia or necropolitics. This article was written in this context to show that Ancient History can serve not to submit, exclude or kill, but to respect and coexist. If we managed to contribute to that, we will be happy.

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