

THE SOCIAL STATUS OF SLAVES AND FREEDMEN IN THE JULIO-CLAUDIAN  
DYNASTY

First and Last Name

Course Name

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The Julio-Claudian dynasty of ancient Rome began during the reign of Augustus, in 27 BCE, and stretched to the era of Nero, ending in 68 CE. Slavery was an immensely important institution in building and maintaining the Roman Empire. A debate exists among the relevant scholarly literature within the discipline of history regarding the social status of slaves and freedmen within Roman society during the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Some historians believe that slaves and freedmen were essentially social pariahs who were despised within Roman society. However, other historians believe that slaves could become freedmen and that some freedmen had vast potential to move up the social ladder, obtain large amounts of wealth, and win respect within Roman society. Overall, examining the social status of slaves and freedmen in the Julio-Claudian dynasty is interesting due this period being marked by the Roman Republic's expansion that created a need for infrastructure development. Specifically, the increased labor demands during this period created difficulties when projects were completed and large numbers of slaves were left needing to be maintained.<sup>1</sup> As manumission restrictions were passed during the Julio-Claudian dynasty due to the rapid increase of owners manumitting their slaves, an examination of the social status and mobility of both slaves and freedmen could generate insights into the realities of social life and status within this period for these groups.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, primary sources during this period reflect mixed views on how slaves and freedmen were regarded, indicating the Julio-Claudian period was marked with progressive ideas threatening the status quo.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine how both sides of this historical debate between scholars tend to overstate both the social potential and despised status of freedmen. The

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<sup>1</sup> M.K. Thornton, "Julio-Claudian Building Programs: Eat, Drink, and Be Merry." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 35, no. 1 (1986): 31.

<sup>2</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press), 92.

truth likely rests somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. While the modern institution of slavery may rely on racial distinctions of inferiority, ancient Roman slavery was based more on social class. Consequently, slaves and freedmen did not have an overt racial distinction that could produce stigma.<sup>3</sup> However, while freedmen could gain freedom and socially rise, this does not necessarily equate to a complete lack of scorn for this social status or that social class distinctions were invisible. Thus, while slaves and freedmen in this period could potentially gain a measure of social mobility, the actual status or stigma accorded to them is uncertain. As such, this paper will defend the thesis that slaves and freedmen within the Julio-Claudian dynasty had potential access to social mobility which could lead to wealth and status within society, indicating that this period in Roman society was characterized by views and mechanisms that enabled slaves and freedmen to achieve such social integration. Moreover, this paper argues it was possible for them to be viewed negatively if they became economically indigent, but also if they attained wealth, indicating that there was some measure of stigma based on social status that was connected with freedmen regardless. Overall, this evidence suggests that ancient Roman slavery was a complex institution with an emphasis on social order, making it difficult to ascertain the exact social status of slaves and freedmen without a careful examination of primary sources that illustrate both sides of these arguments.

Overall, the secondary sources on this topic create discussions that note slaves and freedmen had opportunity for social mobility and the achievement of wealth and social status within the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Some historians have argued that freedmen had opportunities for social advancement as a result of the support and sponsorship of their former masters.<sup>4</sup> Other

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<sup>3</sup> Keith R. Bradley, "Roman Slavery and Roman Law," *Historical Reflections* 15, no. 3 (1988): 478.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Treggiari, "Freedmen and Freedwomen," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. Michael Garagin, 1–5 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

historians have noted that freedmen could achieve success on the basis of their own autonomous skills and ambitions without reliance on their former masters.<sup>5</sup> This is essentially an argument between freedmen's social advancement still being dictated by their former status as slaves versus freedmen having opportunities for social mobility without a social stigma attached to their social status. Additionally, the labor system of this period called for increased slave and freedmen labor to construct infrastructure which in turn produced a difficult reality for freedmen if they could not find work.

This paper consists of two main parts. The first section will examine primary sources to analyze how slaves and freedmen within the Julio-Claudian dynasty were viewed socially and their level of social mobility. Relevant secondary scholarly literature will be included in this section to support a discussion of the evidence that is presented in the primary sources. It will be revealed that although some modern scholars argue that slaves and freedmen clearly did have an amount of social mobility within the Roman society of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, primary sources show that stigma created by social class distinctions and former slave status could still affect how society viewed freedmen and potentially impact their social mobility.

The second section of this paper will be a conclusion and reflection on the findings presented by the primary sources and how this relates back to the overall secondary scholarship on this topic. Three main conclusions are reached by this discussion. The first conclusion is that slavery was certainly viewed as an unfortunate condition as compared to being free, and this could have impacts on how slaves and freedmen were viewed by society. Secondly, slavery in the Julio-Claudian dynasty was often a matter of circumstance and economics, such that a free person could be sold into slavery or taken captive in a war, and thereby become enslaved. This

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<sup>5</sup> Pedro López Barja de Quiroga, "Freedmen Social Mobility in Roman Italy," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 44, no. 3 (1995), 326.

indicates the fluid nature of the institution, offering a view that social mobility, in general, could have afforded slaves and freedmen to rise above these lower social classes, as well. However, lastly, the importance of social status in ancient Roman society suggests that slaves and freedmen were not fully unscathed by some sense of inferiority of their social status. Overall, mechanisms that afforded social mobility and status were necessary for opportunities to be presented to slaves and freedmen.

### **Primary Sources: Porous Boundary and Relative Indifference**

A striking aspect of the primary historical literature surrounding the Julio-Claudian dynasty consists of the fact that the literature shows widely different views on how slaves and freedmen were viewed during this period. Some authors attempt to persuade the reader that slave status is not something in the essence of a man, and that more respect and care should be afforded to them. However, other primary sources exhibit outrage over the social mobility of some freedmen and their attainment of higher social status. These sources note that even though outward appearances show an elevation in rank, the individual still holds some vestiges of their common roots. Overall, the conflicting viewpoints offered in the primary sources provide evidence to make conclusions regarding the feasibility of social movement and society's view of slaves and freedmen.

Appian notes, in *The Civil Wars*, that free people were sometimes sold outright into slavery.<sup>6</sup> The fact that such a thing could happen would seem to suggest that there existed no sense of ontological separation between free people, on the one hand, and slaves on the other. If a free person could be turned into a slave as a matter of simple misfortune, then the implication follows that the condition of being a slave is not to be considered intrinsic to what a person *is* in

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<sup>6</sup> Appian, *The Civil Wars* (New York: Penguin, 1996), 241.

their very essence. Likewise, the fact that a free person could become a slave also implies that a slave could then become free. In short, one gets the sense that the boundary between these two conditions could be rather fluid in ancient Rome. However, even if social classes could be fluid, questions remain about the stigma that could be associated with slaves and freedmen and how society viewed them.

Delving deeper into how society viewed the institution of slavery reveals that the status of slave was not viewed as prestigious in terms of social class. According to Cicero, it is unjust for a person who can be free to not be free, and he makes it clear that freedom is a virtue.<sup>7</sup> The implication emerges that it is a misfortune to be a slave. The clear assumption was that freedom was favorable and that slavery was unfortunate, but Cicero's writings also reveal a viewpoint that offers challenges to slavery, at least for people who can rule themselves.

Regarding the argument that slave status was a matter of social class and not of ontological distinction, Seneca's *Letters on Ethics* help uncover whether slaves were seen in essence as inferior. In a letter, he writes that people may balk at inviting a slave to their tables, stating, "He is a slave."<sup>8</sup> However, Seneca replies to this, "His soul, however, may be that of a freeman."<sup>9</sup> Both the argument and Seneca's reply show that both these conflicting viewpoints were potentially present as evidenced by Seneca's need to try to persuade the reader otherwise.

Seneca's writing also help to shed light on both the stigma and social mobility afforded to slaves and freedmen. In a specific letter, he cautions society to not mistreat or view slaves as inferior. He notes that he has witnessed "many a man 'humbled by fortune'" and cautions only to "despise, then, if you dare, those to whose estate you may at any time descend."<sup>10</sup> This reveals

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<sup>7</sup> Cic. *Rep.* 3.37.

<sup>8</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47.17.

<sup>9</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47.17.

<sup>10</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47.10.

fortune and circumstance as the mechanisms behind slave status, allowing anyone to potentially become a slave based on unfortunate events such as loss of wealth. It also highlights how society viewed slaves. Seneca's letters are attempting to persuade the reader to change their views on slaves, revealing that the tendency to see slaves as inferior was present at the time. Additionally, Seneca states that "we, Romans, are excessively haughty, cruel, and insulting" to slaves.<sup>11</sup>

In his writings, *De Clementia*, Seneca also details a proposal by the Senate that gained support in making slaves wear certain clothing so they could be distinct from free men, but "it was then discovered how dangerous it would be for our slaves to be able to count our numbers."<sup>12</sup> Seneca provides evidence for three important points with his writing. Firstly, it acknowledges that there was an existing belief that slaves needed to be distinguished from free men—perhaps because there was a stigma attached to them. Secondly, it reveals that there was an element of danger attributed to slaves which illustrates a power dynamic, and a fear was present. Thirdly, if the Senate feared that slaves would count the numbers and come to a dangerous conclusion, it most likely reveals that slaves overwhelmingly outnumbered other social classes. Overall, Seneca helps to reveal that stigma and fear shaped perceptions of slaves, but also that there were large numbers of slaves during this period.

The letters of Pliny the Younger indicate that there existed a very real fear based on reality of the slaves revolting against their masters.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, Pliny's letters refer to the murder of an owner of slaves by his own mistreated slaves. This reveals two main takeaways that are important to note in this discussion. Firstly, while certain circumstances and laws could contribute to the proper humane treatment of slaves, this does not equate with ancient Roman

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<sup>11</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47.11.

<sup>12</sup> Sen. *Clem.* 1.24

<sup>13</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 3.14.

slavery practices being devoid of mistreatment or abuse. As the abovementioned writings of Seneca corroborate, Romans could be very cruel to slaves. Secondly, this account of the slave attack describes a very real power dynamic between slave and master, illustrating that, socially, slaves and freedmen could evoke fear or unease in society.

The question of why there were so many slaves during this period and how this relates to social mobility and social status thus arises. In the primary source *The Aqueducts of Rome*, Frontinus made the point that slaves were very important for the construction of Roman infrastructure projects, such as the aqueducts, and that they had considerable latitude to organize themselves into gangs for the purposes of doing their work.<sup>14</sup> Frontinus' account of the capabilities of slaves to organize work gangs has parallels with the secondary research of Bell and Ramsby that posits that slaves and freedmen did have some semblance of self-agency.<sup>15</sup> However, Frontinus' description of the large projects that required slave labor also suggests that there would also be consequences once work was completed. As noted, this may have contributed to the view of slaves as "human leeches" as the research of Bell and Ramsby also notes.<sup>16</sup> The secondary research of Thornton also posits that the large amounts of public work requiring physical labor at the beginning of the Julio-Claudian period would have resulted in a huge influx of slaves due to the need to build temples, monuments, and other public buildings to meet the increase in basic needs for citizens and because "dynasties need such psychological proof of power."<sup>17</sup> She claims that as these projects were completed, the need for slave labor would have decreased, resulting in a large number of slaves with little or no work to do, creating

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<sup>14</sup> Frontin. *Aq.* 2.117.

<sup>15</sup> Sinclair Bell and Teresa Ramsby. *Free at Last! The Impact of Freed Slaves on the Roman Empire*. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2012: 4

<sup>16</sup> Bell and Ramsby, *Free at Last!*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Thornton, "Julio-Claudian Building Programs," 28.



a “parasite class, underemployed and nonproductive,” who would have still been funded by their owners.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, an analysis of Frontinus’ writing reveals the growing importance of slave labor during this time period for infrastructure development projects, but conclusions can also be made about the effects of project completion on slave labor demands. With slave owners required to maintain their slaves, both increased manumission rates and social stigma could result from these circumstances. However, there is an important distinction between how freedmen and slaves fared during times when labor demand decreased. According to Thornton, it was not uncommon at all for freedmen to sell themselves back into the institution of slavery to survive when there was no work.<sup>19</sup> Slaves, on the other hand, had to be maintained with food, clothing, and medical care.<sup>20</sup> This reveals that social mobility was possible, but also that stigma associated with indigency was present. In addition, even being a freedmen did not necessarily equate to success as opportunity was connected to societal demands for the type of skill freedmen had.

As such, Frontinus’ descriptions of Roman aqueduct projects also allow other conclusions to be made. These projects would have necessitated certain skills and training. This hints at the secondary research of Rostovzeff that notes the autonomy of freedmen that was afforded by their valuable skills that were utilized while they were slaves, and after they were freed.<sup>21</sup> The scholarly argument in favor of the autonomy of freedmen is fleshed out by Rostovzeff, who has astutely noted that since the Roman Empire was economically dependent on slave labor, slaves already possessed a significant array of valued work skills, which they used to

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<sup>18</sup> Thornton, 28.

<sup>19</sup> Thornton, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Thornton, 30.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire, Vol. 1*, (New York: Biblio and Tannen Publishers, 1926): 98.

make their contributions to society while still slaves.<sup>22</sup> As such, it stands to reason that freedmen still had valuable skills to contribute to the Roman economy and that, moreover, there may have been several instances in which they were the best-qualified to provide the skills that were in demand. In other words, the economic viability of freedmen may have already largely been built into the kinds of work that they did prior to being freed, with the corresponding implication that the level of wealth and success freedmen attained after being freed often depended on what skills they had possessed when they were slaves. For example, male slaves who were tutors and highly educated would have had substantial opportunities, as would have female slaves who had worked within domestic households.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, slaves with less privileged skills may have had a more difficult time rising through the social ranks upon becoming freedmen. Overall, this helps to reveal mechanisms for social mobility in the form of valuable skill sets may have been afforded more to slaves and freedmen with positions of employment which were valued by society for their skills.

Seneca's *Letters on Ethics* can be used a primary source to provide evidence for these ideas, but it also sheds light on social stigma attached to certain professions. Seneca writes, "You are mistaken if you think that I would bar from my table certain slaves whose duties are more humble, as, for example, yonder muleteer or yonder herdsman; I propose to value them according to their character, and not according to their duties."<sup>24</sup> This shows that certain slave occupations would have been given more prestige or value, but also reveals a counterargument was present in society against doing this as seen through Seneca's views on this matter.

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<sup>22</sup> Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*," 98.

<sup>23</sup> Treggiari, "Freedmen and Freedwomen," 3.

<sup>24</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47.15.

So far in this discussion, the primary sources have indicated that the status of slaves were the result of circumstance, certain skills could have provided mechanisms for social mobility to some, and also that there were two competing views of slaves and freedmen; one that viewed them with a social stigma and another that was more progressive in arguing for their better treatment and better status. However, it is also necessary to look at primary sources that detail examples of slave and freedmen social mobility to examine what circumstances were necessary to create this movement and how society viewed it.

The writings of Suetonius help to reveal the mechanisms required for social mobility and how important social class distinctions were to the Romans in this period. Suetonius writes that Claudius “confiscated the estates of all freedmen who presumed to take upon themselves the equestrian rank.”<sup>25</sup> This provides evidence for the Romans viewing social class as important and that freedmen who presumed to rise above their social standing were punished. In addition, Suetonius then states that some freedmen “were ungrateful to their patrons” and if they were, Claudius would have them “reduced to their former condition of slavery.”<sup>26</sup> This reveals that social mobility could easily place freedmen back into slave status and that a patron system was in place that benefitted freedmen—or at least some freedmen. Mouritsen’s secondary research elaborates on these ideas by stating the relationship between slaves and their patrons played a significant role in determining where in society they would be welcomed and accepted. In the Julio-Claudian period, the patron-client relationship was a holdover from the slave-master relationship.<sup>27</sup> This means that the newly freed slave who already had little by way of worldly possessions would be dependent on the patronage of their former masters to sustain themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> Suet. *Cl.* 25.

<sup>26</sup> Suet. *Cl.* 25.

<sup>27</sup> Henrik Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 85.

However, Mouritsen also discusses the pitfalls of this structure, pointing out that this dependence upon a patron was still a restrictive situation for former slaves that hindered them from being independent by ensuring their economic viability remained dependent upon the patrons under whom they served.<sup>28</sup> As shown by Suetonius' writings, these patrons could also advance lawsuits against freedmen with Claudius, as described by Suetonius, vowing to "always give judgment against the freedmen."<sup>29</sup>

According to Temen's scholarly research, slaves in the Julio-Claudian dynasty had the opportunity to become freedmen, and freedmen had significant opportunities available to them for social mobility, with such opportunities often being connected to the doors that their former masters were able to open for them.<sup>30</sup> This research suggests the boundaries between slave and free status in ancient Rome could be porous, but questions arise about how prevalent these opportunities for success actually were during this period and under which conditions. Once a slave had become a freedman, he was often strongly associated with the family of his former master, even taking the name of that family. If the former master, then granted the freedman wealth and access to connections within society, that freedman could potentially rise quite high within society. The important question then becomes not whether a person had been a slave but rather whether a slave becomes a freedman as well as the conditions under which the slave obtains freedom. Ultimately, this appears to determine the extent of opportunities for social mobility and how society would view individuals.

Turning to the letters of Pliny the Younger, Pliny details some of the story and uproar associated with Claudius' freedman, Pallas. Pliny writes, "On the road to Tibur, less than a mile

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<sup>28</sup> Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, 85.

<sup>29</sup> Suet. *Cl.* 25.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Temen, "The Labor Market of the Early Roman Empire," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 4 (2004): 522.

from Rome...there is a monument to Pallas with the following inscription: To him the Senate decreed in return for his loyal services to his patrons, the insignia of a praetor, and the sum of fifteen million sesteres.”<sup>31</sup> This provides evidence of Pallas’ social mobility and elevated social status, with this being afforded to him from his connections with his patron, the emperor Claudius. As noted, Pallas was even given a monument and the Senate granted him the high rank of praetor. Only using this as evidence of the potential social mobility of freedmen, however, would be a mistake due to the social stigma that even Pallas was given even though the Senate practically begged him to wear a gold ring befitting his new prestige rather than the “slave’s iron one.”<sup>32</sup> If the discussion is looking to examine the social realities of the everyday lives of most slaves and freedmen, then while Pallas’ story reveals that extraordinary social mobility could be obtained, it largely was not a reality for most.

The scholarly research of Treggiari notes the importance of the relationship between the master and the slave in this regard, arguing that the economic viability of freed slaves depend, to a great extent, on the help they obtained from their patrons or former masters, as freedmen who were granted the most help were able to rapidly rise through the rungs of the social ladder, also significantly increasing their earning potential in the process.<sup>33</sup> This point implies that not all slaves and freedmen had equal opportunities with respect to social mobility. For example, some masters may have simply declined to free their slaves, and others may have freed them but declined to give them any significant material support. Such differences in the conditions and circumstances surrounding manumission would have significant effects on the fates of slaves and freedmen. However, some slaves were even born as slaves within households which would have

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<sup>31</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 9.29–32.

<sup>32</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 9.29–32.

<sup>33</sup> Treggiari, “Freedmen and Freedwomen,” 3.

clearly produced a particularly intimate bond between master and slave, leading to more opportunity perhaps.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth noting that during the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the relationship between the master and the slave was seen precisely as a relationship. According to Roller, this relationship was even used as analogy for the relationship that prevailed between the emperor and his people, including aristocrats, with the emperor of course occupying the position of the master.<sup>35</sup> This framing of the relationship suggested a sense of mutual obligation within the overarching frame of dominance and submission. As such, many masters likely did feel a sense of duty to provide their slaves with support upon manumission, since this could have been understood as one of the basic obligations of the master toward the slave within the context of their relationship. However, questions arise about how prevalent this sense of mutual obligation was in Julio-Claudian society.

Examining primary source material by Tacitus allows an examination of the power dynamics between slave/freedman and master/patron and how it was shifting during this period. In his *Annals*, Tacitus writes about the reign of Nero and the “iniquities of freedmen.”<sup>36</sup> Specifically, Tacitus states that “insolence, grown harder with liberty, had reached a point where freedmen were no longer content to be equal before the law with their patrons, but mocked their tameness and actually raised their hands to strike.”<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Tacitus writes the Senate was considering a proposal that would allow former owners to annul emancipation and there were supporters for this measure. However, it is also noted that “Nero was doubtful whether to assume

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<sup>34</sup> W.V. Harris, “A Julio-Claudian Business Family?” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 130 (2000), 264.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew W. Roller, *Constructing Autocracy: Aristocrats and Emperors in Julio-Claudian Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>36</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.26.

<sup>37</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.26.

responsibility for the measure, as his advisors were few and their opinions conflicting.”<sup>38</sup>

Overall, this shows a growing discontent with freedmen and a shift that was occurring in the power dynamics of the relationships between freedmen and patrons. Furthermore, the hesitancy of some to support this measure indicates there was a fear of backlash, indicating either political criticism or possible discontent among the freedmen (or both) were the source of apprehension.

This primary evidence is additionally supported by the writings of Seneca in his *Letters on Ethics*. Seneca writes, “I have seen standing in the line, before the door of Callistus, the former master of Callistus; I have seen the master himself shut out while others were welcomed...”<sup>39</sup> This helps support the idea that there was potential social mobility for slaves and freedmen, but also supports the idea of changing power dynamics this was causing. Overall, while Seneca’s writings are an appeal to persuade the viewer to treat and view slaves and freedmen with greater care and respect, it also reveals that society’s views on the social mobility of slaves and freedmen was not overly supportive.

In addition, Pliny also remarks upon how Pallas’ social mobility was viewed by some portion of society. He writes, “You will think it a joke—or an outrage, but a joke after all...” and he states Pallas’ elevation as evidence of Pallas’ “insolence,” the emperor’s “complaisance,” and the Senate’s “degradation.”<sup>40</sup> Pliny’s writings provide evidence of great social mobility—for those fortunate enough to have the right patrons—but also shows that even powerful patrons, elevation in social status, and valued skills were not enough, in this instance, to overcome the social stigma that was still attached to Pallas from his former status. The secondary research of De Quiroga that argues that freedmen had considerable opportunity for social mobility within

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<sup>38</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.26.

<sup>39</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 47.9.

<sup>40</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 9.29–32.

ancient Roman society, asserting that they could “attain attractive positions and enjoy income levels well above those of the common people” even while acknowledging that they could also be the “object of scathing jokes and relentless criticism.”<sup>41</sup> The latter point would seem to suggest that a prejudice against freedmen did in fact exist within Roman society and that the prejudice could have interfered with the social opportunities of the freedmen. Properly understood, then, it would seem that this prejudice had the potential to interfere with the social mobility of slaves and freedmen, and not only for those who became indigent or sapped the resources of patrons or masters. It is also important to note that Pallas’ elevation to praetor, the monument, and the offered sum of money all indicate that there was a sentiment present in society that did, indeed, respect Pallas. Overall, these conflicting viewpoints highlight the difficulties in creating conclusions on the extent of social mobility and social status afforded to slaves and freedmen.

Finally, Petronius’ writings in the literary work of the *Satyricon*, describe the character of Trimalchio, a freedman who had risen in social status. Petronius writes that Trimalchio wore “a smaller ring which appeared to me to be entirely gold but was really set all around with iron cut out in little stars.”<sup>42</sup> Previously noted in the discussion of Pallas, certain social classes would wear certain rings to signify status. The lowly iron material was what a slave would wear, and Petronius’ description symbolizes that even though Trimalchio appeared as a higher social ranking, he still occupied a lower rank in society. This appears to support the idea that even with Trimalchio’s attainment of wealth, as this section of the *Satyricon* describes in great detail, there was still a level of stigma attached to him. Petronius writes that Trimalchio says, “As far as I’m

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<sup>41</sup> De Quiroga, “Freedmen Social Mobility in Roman Italy,” 326.

<sup>42</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 32.



concerned, anyone may relieve himself in the dining room.”<sup>43</sup> Trimalchio is exceedingly portrayed as vulgar, indecorous, and as an object of mockery in Petronius’ text. Overall, this helps to reveal how society was viewing the social mobility of freedmen and that the stigma of having been a lower social class would have followed individuals regardless of wealth. As seen in the discussion of Pallas, even valued skills and merit was not enough to fully guard against outrage or mockery. However, having a powerful patron such as the emperor Claudius would have created benefits that most freedmen would not have had.

### **Conclusion**

An important point that can be drawn from the above examination of primary sources is that there are multiple viewpoints that differ drastically on this topic, indicating that secondary scholarly research that comes to firm conclusions on this topic may not be taking the social realities of Roman life into proper consideration. As such, it is important not to oversimplify this topic by asserting that “all” freedmen and slaves were afforded the same opportunities for social advancement. Conversely, it is also prudent to not make overarching statements that suppose that an elevation in social ranking would equate to respect for slaves and freedmen. The social realities within Julio-Claudian Rome were much more complex than can be described by these oversimplifications.

This discussion is also reflective of what could be identified as the ontological versus the contingent views of slavery. The ontological view of slavery would suggest that the slave is an intrinsically inferior kind of person, such that one could say of a slave: Born a slave, once a slave, always a slave. Such a view would lead to people despising the slave for who that person was in their essence. This type of viewpoint was present during this period in Rome as evidenced

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<sup>43</sup> Petr. *Sat.* 47.

by Petronius' scathing satire of the freedman Trimalchio and the symbolism of the iron ring that looked like gold. Conversely, the contingent point of view would have viewed slave status as a social condition based on misfortune or circumstance and not something linked to the essence of a person. This viewpoint, as evidenced by Seneca in his *Letters on Ethics*, was also present in Julio-Claudian society. Consequently, attempting to either conclude, in general, that slaves and freedmen could gain respect and prestige or that a social stigma followed them regardless of social elevation is difficult.

The more compelling conclusion that could be made from this discussion is that mechanisms such as valuable skillsets and patrons were present in the Julio-Claudian dynasty that could potentially lead to the social mobility and increased social status of slaves and freedmen. However, as evidenced by Pallas' story, even having a powerful patron would not guard against criticism and outrage. Additionally, the primary sources discussed above noted that the skills that slaves and freedmen possessed would have been valuable considering the need for these skills in the creation of important Roman infrastructure. Overall, this demonstrates that some slaves and freedmen could have used these skill sets, patronage, and self-agency to advance socially, but also highlights the social realities that could impede social advancement. While there may have existed a more contingent view of slavery, there was also an ontological viewpoint present that would have created obstacles for slaves and freedmen.

Drawing upon the research of Treggiari, the economic viability of freed slaves could depend on the aid they received from former masters or patrons.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, while the boundary between slave and freedman could be viewed as porous, the reality of economics was a factor in the social mobility of former slaves. If labor demands decreased for the specific skillset

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<sup>44</sup> Treggiari, "Freedmen and Freedwomen," 3.

that a freedmen had, economic hardship, decreased social mobility, and stigma would be consequences.

However, it is important to note the social transformation of the slave into a freedman was by no means uncommon during this period. Indeed, according to Bradley, manumission restrictions were passed during the Julio-Claudian dynasty because so many masters were freeing so many slaves that the rate of manumission was growing unsustainable for the Roman society as a whole.<sup>45</sup> This point suggests that many slaves experienced slavery as a temporary social status on the road to becoming a freedman rather than as a condition of lifelong servitude. However, the primary sources have provided evidence that detail the growing unease surrounding this social mobility and proposals that also sought to revoke emancipation based on suits that former owners could bring against their former slaves. Again, this creates a conflicting view that may support the conclusion that economic reasons for manumission (dodging having to maintain a slave workforce in times of low demand) were contradicting with social views that slaves should remain in that social condition.

As a caveat though, the secondary literature examined does not suggest that slaves and freedmen had a particularly easy time with rising through the social ranks. That is, no one would dispute the fact that starting off as a slave is disadvantageous in terms of social status and mobility, since a slave would essentially be starting at the bottom of the social ladder and trying to work their way upward. This process would surely be easier for any given person if they did not start at the very bottom. The present paper's argument, however, has not focused on the question of whether slaves and freedmen had a more difficult time than people who were always

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<sup>45</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 92.

free when it came to social mobility. The argument has only been that it was possible for slaves and freedmen to move up the social ladder and what the contributing mechanisms were.

In conclusion, this paper has found that some slaves and freedmen had potential opportunities for social mobility during the Julio-Claudian dynasty, but that this mobility was dependent on certain mechanisms being present. Through an examination of primary sources, the boundary between slaves and free people within ancient Roman society was found to be a porous one, illustrating that free people could become slaves and slaves could become free. However, this type of institution of slavery was not entirely without ontological distinctions, as both viewpoints of the inferiority of slaves in essence and the contingent view of slavery as a circumstance were present. Consequently, there were varying levels of social stigma that could be attached to both slaves and freedmen. Pliny's story of Pallas indicates that even freedmen with powerful patrons and valuable skillsets could still be viewed with scorn by society, but that they also could be respected by some. Consequently, a social stigma could still be present that could hinder the social mobility of slaves and freedmen, but social advancement was possible if the right mechanisms were present.

Overall, scholarly arguments that either state that slaves and freedmen had maximum social mobility or that these social classes had no opportunity for social advancement during the Julio-Claudian dynasty are oversimplifying the complexities of Roman society. Certain factors could contribute to some slaves and freedmen having opportunities for social mobility, but these factors were not widely available to all. Additionally, scholarly arguments that claim that slaves and freedmen were viewed with only scorn or had immense potential for gaining prestige also miss the opportunity to delve deeper into this period's social contradictions as a wide range of viewpoints were present. The reality of social status and advancement for slaves and freedmen

during the Julio-Claudian dynasty could be anywhere on the spectrum discussed by historians and was largely determined by the mechanisms of having valuable skillsets and patrons with kinder views such as Seneca argued for.

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