

Roman Empire Slaves in Literary and Administrative Roles, and their Correlation with Identity

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Trigger Warnings: Discussions of slavery



Abstract:

While slavery was not a foreign concept to many ancient societies, the Roman Empire was unique in the types of roles slaves were involved in. While most, if not all, slaves were involved in laborious work of some sort, a topic of interest is slaves in urban settings who did administrative and literary work for their owners. The type of work that is of interest is those slaves who were copyists, amanuenses, readers, and writers. With these types of jobs in mind, I examined how the slaves' involvement in these roles would have contributed to their identity as slaves. Consequently, there is also the converse side of the analysis that examines how slave owners would have formed their elite identity

by tasking their slaves with these duties. Specifically, I surveyed two cases of slave owners who engaged their slaves in literary and administrative work: Pliny the Elder and the hundreds of slaves he owned, and Marcus Tullius Cicero and his slave Tiro. Through these two contrasting accounts of aristocratic slave owners and their slaves who were involved in the administrative and literary work, I theorize about how both groups would have thought, or didn't think, about their identity. Aspects of social hierarchy, physical labour of the body, and manumission are all discussed and considered.

The Roman Empire was characterized by many aspects ranging from those of cultural, linguistic, economic, political, and social categories. An interesting component of the Roman Empire that was unlike that of any other ancient society, was slavery. It was not uncommon for many ancient societies to practice slavery, yet the Romans were of a certain eccentricity in that their slave society had a high percentage of manumission¹—the act of being freed from slavery. A large population of enslaved people performed extremely laborious jobs in rural settings under harsh conditions, such as wearing collars and chains.² Yet slaves also existed in urban settings as household slaves, public imperial slaves, and were involved with anything regarding physical labour.³

There are various discourses on slave identity during the Roman Empire, and it is difficult to define without having any direct evidence from slaves themselves.⁴ A particular interest when it comes to slaves in the Roman Empire is those who were tasked with administrative roles, particularly regarding a literary aspect. There is evidence that slaves performed certain roles under their owners pertaining to literary customs, such as copyediting and being an amanuensis (someone who took dictation).⁵ However, due to the lack of personal and anecdotal evidence from slaves

themselves, the concept of how these roles shaped their identity can only be speculated about. Additionally, this theory is based on evidence that exists from other literate groups, mostly the elite population. There are specific accounts of aristocratic, elite Romans who owned slaves that performed literary roles, such as Pliny the Elder⁶ and Marcus Tullius Cicero.⁷ With these elite owners in mind, along with general accounts of slaves involved in these literary and administrative roles, an understanding of how the identity of both the slaves and their owners was formed can be evaluated.

Many influential texts that we have today come from the period of the Roman Empire. During a time when everything needed to be written out by hand to be mass produced, it's clear that this process was not performed by a single individual. One method of producing, upkeep, and distributing literature was using slaves.⁸ Because slaves assisted with these aspects of literature, the Roman literary world was able to thrive on the illustrious and comprehensive scale that it does to this day. This also shows the variety and range of roles that a slave would have had in the society of the Roman Empire. If one slave lived in a rural setting doing physically laborious work, and another slave was involved in the domestic, administrative side of things, it can be difficult to define a comprehensive slave identity. The roles they were involved in during their enslavement, and the skill sets they acquired as a result, most likely were starkly different. Therefore, it makes sense to examine slave identity based on the roles they were involved in, rather than by a singular group definition.

Any Roman author that produced literature in the empire would have been part of a small group of educated and literate men. There was not a large percentage of the population that possessed literacy skills, let alone the ability to create and utilize customs of literature.⁹ So, for a slave to be involved in the composition and production of literature, when there was already a small percentage of people with the skills to do so, arguably would have greatly influenced their self-perception in terms of their identity. It is difficult to say exactly how many domestic slaves would have been involved in these literary and

¹ Bankston, Zach, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Review* 31, no. 3 (2012): 205.

² Roymans, Nico, and Marenne Zandstra. "Indications for Rural Slavery in the Northern Provinces." In *Villa Landscapes in the Roman North: Economy, Culture and Lifestyles* (Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 162.

³ Verboven, Koenraad, and Christian Laes. "Work, Labour, Professions. What's in a Name?" *Work, Labour, and Professions in the Roman World*. (Brill, 2017), 2.

⁴ Fitzgerald, William. "Introduction: living with slaves." In *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination*. (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

⁵ Johnson, William A., and Holt N. Parker. "Situating Literacy at Rome." In *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 122.

⁶ Blake, Sarah, "Now You See Them: Slaves and Other Objects as Elements of the Roman Master," *Helios* 39, (2012): 194.

⁷ Bankston, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 203.

⁸ Fitzgerald, "Introduction: living with slaves," 2.

⁹ Johnson, William A., and Holt N. Parker. "Literacy or Literacies in Rome?" In *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 46.

administrative roles. However, it is plausible that these duties would have been a step-up from the usual domestic roles that slaves in urban settings were often involved in.¹⁰ Duties such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the owner's children were all responsibilities that urban slaves did in the household. Therefore, being involved in the elite space of producing literature, alongside the owner who had the skillset to do so, would have influenced the enslaved person's identity—whether directly or indirectly.

It is unclear whether the elite owner instructed his slaves to be involved in these literary roles because of their skillset, or due to the convenience of having slaves. It was most likely the latter. Nevertheless, this decision by the owner to employ slaves for literary and administrative roles would have influenced how the enslaved person thought of themselves; especially as someone who possessed the ability to be involved in the act of producing literature.

As Habinek puts it, slaves were involved in writing, "sometimes in the practical sense that a slave [would] function as copyist or amanuensis"¹¹ which further emphasizes that they were engaged in the literary world. However, Habinek also makes the statement that because writing involved the body there was a "submission to an externally imposed system of constraints, and thus treated as socially inferior to the free exercise of the voice."¹² This goes to show the other side of slave involvement in the writing process, and how this would have contributed to their identity. While their role as a copyist or an amanuensis might have granted them the privilege of being part of an elite group akin to their owners, these types of jobs still reinforced their physical condition of being a slave. Ultimately, in terms of Roman social structure, slaves were an inferior group. Therefore, it stands to reason that regardless of how prestigious these literary duties appeared, there would always be the underlying label regarding their social status.

This in turn shows how slave and owner identity go hand-in-hand with one another. Even if the owner involves his slaves in something as prestigious as creating literary

work, he still must maintain his authority. Therefore, as Habinek said, there is still the underlying concept of slave work involving the body, which puts the owner above the slave—both physically and socially. This also reinforces the concept of inferior slave identity for the enslaved person, and superior identity for the aristocratic owner. The slave ultimately was subjected to work involving labour, and their owner was the one reinforcing it.

The case of the author Pliny the Elder, and his utilization of slaves in the literary process, as well as their accommodation to him, showcases this concept of elevating the elite owner's identity and status. Pliny's slaves tended to him in many respects: reading to him, bathing him, along with other ways of serving him.¹³ Here there is a focus on these actions being done to Pliny, making him a passive subject. This concept enhances the fact that owners used their slaves to uplift their own identity. Pliny had his slaves accommodate him, and he used them as objects to enhance his aristocratic identity as an elite slave owner. In terms of literary involvement, Pliny's slaves acted as readers and writers for him.¹⁴ This example is consistent with the idea that even though slaves might have been involved in literary work, the concept of their physical roles being used to uplift their owner is reinforced here. Additionally, someone like Pliny would have had around 500 slaves.¹⁵ Therefore, uniqueness in terms of literary skill set would not have been outstanding, since his slaves would have shared these traits. On the other hand, for Pliny, the constant attention given to him from his slaves, and the fact that he

¹⁰ Garnsey, Peter, Richard Saller, Jaś Elsner, Martin Goodman, Richard Gordon, Greg Woolf, and Marguerite Hirt. "Family and Household," In *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture*, 2nd ed., (University of California Press, 2015), 153.

¹¹ Johnson, William A., and Holt N. Parker. "Situating Literacy at Rome," In *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 122.

¹² Johnson, "Situating Literacy at Rome," 122.

¹³ Johnson, William A., "Reading for Efficiency in Ancient Rome: The Case of Pliny the Elder," *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, 15, (January 2023): 17.

¹⁴ Johnson, "Reading for Efficiency in Ancient Rome: The Case of Pliny the Elder," 17.

¹⁵ Johnson, "Reading for Efficiency in Ancient Rome: The Case of Pliny the Elder," 17.

was able to get credit for his literary work on the backs of them, reinforced the elite idea that slaves are lesser than; and that they are used to bring attention to the elite status of the owner. As well, to reinforce their elitist, superior identity through the literary roles of slaves.¹⁶

Pliny the Elder is one case of an elite owner utilizing his slaves for literary production and consumption. Yet, it is an exceptional one because of the sheer number of slaves that he had, and that were involved in that process. Another elite owner who had a slave work on the technical production of literature and administration was the politician Marcus Tullius Cicero and his slave Marcus Tullius Tiro.¹⁷ Tiro's case is unique, in that the skillset he acquired in his role as Cicero's assistant and letter-writer, allowed him to garner status. Additionally, "his talents were always in demand"¹⁸ even after Cicero's death. Compared to the slaves of Pliny the Elder, Tiro is a significant case because of his acquired skill set. Due to Tiro's abilities, and Cicero's elite status, he could be classified as a unique case of a slave involved in literary tasks for their owners.¹⁹

This exceptional relationship between Cicero and Tiro would have significantly contributed to the evolving formation of both their roles

within the social structure of Roman society, but also their identity as well. While it was not uncommon to have one's slaves involved in these literary and administrative roles,²⁰ the language Cicero uses in his letters to Tiro shows his extreme affection and admiration for the slave. In one of his letters, Cicero addresses him as his "dear Tiro" and highlights the intricacies of their relationship; Cicero advises Tiro to "look after your health—or as you know I care for you."²¹ Based on the treatment from other owners towards their slaves in literary roles—such as Pliny for instance—it is clear that Cicero cared deeply for Tiro.

This display of affection, and evidence of an exceptional relationship, would have been unique for someone in Cicero's position. Most of the time Roman owners used slaves for a variety of different kinds of work, and in this case, it was for literary purposes. One would think based on the evidence of slavery from the Roman Empire that these kinds of relationships would have been economically motivated towards the interests of the owner. It would not be uncommon for some type of relationship to form between the slave and the owner—especially in an urban domestic setting, as they would see each other on a regular basis. However, Cicero and Tiro's connection seems like a deviation from the Roman societal norm. This may have led to Cicero having confusing feelings regarding his identity as an elite male citizen. Roman social classes existed in such a way that each person who was situated in their class would have been socially aware of the position and its implications.²² Therefore, for someone of higher status like Cicero to be publicly writing his admiration for his slave contends with what might be thought of as the social norm of interactions among people in Roman social classes.

However, as was seen previously, this is an exceptional case. Bankston points out that Cicero was keen on loyalty and affection from his freedman, yet often did not receive these qualities he aspired for.²³ Therefore it ascertains that if someone like Tiro was providing these values to his owner, then Cicero would think highly of him. However, Tiro may have devoted his loyalty to Cicero

¹⁶ Blake, Sarah, "Now You See Them: Slaves and Other Objects as Elements of the Roman Master," 207.

¹⁷ Bankston, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 203.

¹⁸ Renzo, Anthony Di, "His Master's Voice: Tiro and the Rise of the Roman Secretarial Class," *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 30, no. 2 (April 2000): 155.

¹⁹ Bankston "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 203.

²⁰ Fitzgerald, William. "Introduction: living with slaves." In *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 2.

²¹ Cicero. *Letters to Friends, Volume II: Letters 114-280*. Edited and translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey. Loeb Classical Library 216. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

²² Garnsey, Peter, Richard Saller, Jaś Elsner, Martin Goodman, Richard Gordon, Greg Woolf, and Marguerite Hirt. "The Social Hierarchy," In *The Roman Empire: Economy, Society and Culture*, 2nd ed., (University of California Press, 2015), 134.

²³ Bankston, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 205–6.

on account of the fact that he was a slave, and because he was obligated to. A freedman (someone who was freed from slavery by their owner) could have the luxury of not following these types of commands from their former owner. At the end of the day, they are not legally contracted to their employer. Someone like Tiro would not have been able to ignore these qualities their owner desired from them, because he was a slave.

While Tiro was highly skilled in what he did for Cicero, there is the underlying fact that he was Cicero's slave, and his position in the Roman social hierarchy defined him as such. It is evident that not all urban domestic slaves would have had the privilege to be allowed in such a serious role. While Tiro's skills would have bolstered his concept of his identity as a slave, the fact remains that Tiro inevitably was a slave until his release from slavery (manumission) in 53 BCE.²⁴

When Tiro was freed from slavery he continued to work alongside Cicero, who employed him.²⁵ This concept is nothing new in terms of freedmen's employment in the Roman Empire. Often freedmen would have been employed by their previous owners for a variety of reasons.²⁶ It seems that Tiro was once again an exceptional case, in that his skills of literary and administrative knowledge were valued during his time as a slave, as well as when he was manumitted.

Along with the case of Tiro, there was the possibility that freedmen who were involved in literary and administrative roles as slaves would have had sets of skills that employers found valuable. As seen, these literary roles that some slaves were in were not typically part of routine urban customs of slavery.²⁷ Additionally, it was not uncommon for Roman owners to employ their past slaves as freedmen. Sometimes these freedmen would be doing similar work in literary and administrative settings, like when they were a slave, and then would carry these skills with them into their employment.²⁸ It's clear that being educated in the Roman Empire was highly acclaimed, and it's evident that this value of education extended from owners to their slaves, and carried through to their lives after manumission. Therefore, slave identity

in relation to literary skill goes beyond the status of being enslaved. Slaves being a part of literary production while in the confines of their status were able to benefit them when it came to manumission. This would have influenced their identity as more than just a slave who could possess privileged roles—it would have allowed them to find work and value in their role as a freedperson that could contribute to the production of literature.

However, this notion is slightly challenged by Temin's view that regardless of social status, education prevailed: "The fundamental economic division...was between educated and uneducated—skilled and unskilled—not between slave and free."²⁹ This further complicates the notion of slave identity in terms of literary involvement. If education was valued the most in terms of what it can provide for the economy, then the idea of status is irrelevant. However, that cannot be the only case. Pliny the Elder's slaves were involved in the literary process alongside him; yet they were used as a means to an end for Pliny. Their role was to read and write for him, but this practice was intended to uplift and bolster him. This would have elevated his perception of his identity regarding being an elite slave owner and would have diminished the slaves' perception of the value of the education they had, and the jobs they did. However, for Cicero's slave Tiro, the relationship appeared more fraternal and somewhat equal—Cicero cared for Tiro deeply, and this was expressed through the content of his letters. Additionally, Tiro was employed by Cicero in his freedom in the same duties he had as a slave. Therefore, Tiro's individual slave identity would have differed from those of Pliny's slaves. Even

²⁴ Bankston, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 208.

²⁵ Bankston, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 208.

²⁶ Bankston, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 208.

²⁷ Garnsey, "Family and Household," 153.

²⁸ Temin, Peter. "The Labor Market of the Early Roman Empire." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 34, no. 4 (2004), 537.

²⁹ Temin, "The Labor Market of the Early Roman Empire." 538.

though both Tiro and Pliny's slaves would have been involved in assisting their owners in the reading and writing process, it was ultimately the owner's treatment towards their slave(s) that resulted in the slave's formation of their literary identity.

Additionally, because the slave owner both directly and indirectly curates the slave literary identity, they are also shaping their identity as an elite owner. Cicero is someone who prides himself on high manumission rates for his slaves and likes loyalty from his freedmen.³⁰ Pliny on the other hand had hundreds of slaves tending to him personally that resulted in him being credited as the author yet was done through him being the passive subject. This would have contributed to his identity as a Roman slave owner who uses slaves as a means to an end. Cicero's elite slave owner identity, however, presents him as someone who values the work slaves do and it was evident in his actions as an active subject.

It is clear that the involvement of slaves in the literary and administrative environment of their owners in the Roman Empire had an influential impact on their identity, as well as their owners. Through general understandings of what kind of roles they did, such as taking dictation and being copyists, along with specific case studies of slaves such as those of Pliny the Elder, and Tiro, a comprehensive understanding of identity can be evaluated. Both slave and owner identity influence each other through the owner's treatment of their slaves in the literary process, as well as the individual skill set the slave had in the role.

Additionally, there is one notion of how in terms of the Roman economy, one's status was irrelevant, as long as their literary skill set could contribute to the economy.³¹ While this complicates the notion of identity in terms of

slave skill set in the function of literature, the overall idea was that slaves in administrative and literary functions were dependent on their owners; and in turn, the owner's identity and perception of themselves was influenced by their treatment of their slaves. Furthermore, any sort of literary skill acquired in slavery was beneficial for that individual in their manumission. Because the Roman economy depended on these skill sets for its production of literature, it would have been vital for a freedman to possess these skills. This further emphasizes the idea that regardless of the treatment of the slaves while under the ownership of their master, the skills they acquired were of value in the larger social structure. However, because their identity was influenced in slavery related to literacy and administrative roles, there would have been an opportunity in their freedom to continue these skills, and have a newly formed identity in relation to their skills, but also their newfound freedom.

³⁰ Bankston, "Administrative Slavery in the Ancient Roman Republic: The Value of Marcus Tullius Tiro in Ciceronian Rhetoric," 205-6.

³¹ Temin, "The Labor Market of the Early Roman Empire." 538.

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