



FREEDMEN: NEW CITIZENS

PRESENTER: DR. CLAIRE HOLLERAN, UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Claire: Under the Roman empire, it became widespread for masters to free their slaves, and a huge new class of citizens was created: the freedmen.

A common cliché of the Roman freed slave is embodied in the fictional freedman Trimalchio in Petronius' *Satyricon*. As Trimalchio is carried into his own dinner party with a fanfare, even some of his own guests can't help themselves from laughing at him, with his scarlet cloak and his fingers covered with rings. Here Trimalchio is being mocked for his extravagance, just as some today might mock celebrities for their lavish spending but supposed lack of taste. But this all tells us very little about the real lives of Roman freedmen.

Freedmen owed obligations to their former masters. These were of two types: *obsequia*, which was a sort of open-ended loyalty, and *officia*, which were named duties or labours.

Generally the relationship between a freedman and his former owner or patron, was mutually beneficial; the freedman relied on his patron's support in life and business, while the patron benefited financially from his freedman's profits. However, not all freedmen were successful and certainly few were as wealthy as Trimalchio.

Walking down the street, it would have been impossible to distinguish a freedman from a freeborn Roman, and a freedman's children would have been born free Roman citizens. In reality a large proportion of the population of Rome would have been freedmen, or the descendants of freedmen.

In fact, many freedmen were better off than poor freeborn citizens, due to the trade they learnt as a slave and the support of their ex-masters.

So this inscription records a continued close relationship between a freedman and his patron; so Lucretius set this up for his best freedman, his *liberto optimo: bene merenti* - well-deserving. But not all freedmen were so fortunate, and there are stories of continued exploitation. Funerary monuments and tombs like this one often record positive and harmonious relationships, whereas legal texts tend to record disputes.

But perhaps the most important thing to a freed slave would be the family they could now have. As a slave, they could not legally marry, and any children they bore would also be slaves. Now in the British Museum, this tombstone records the lives of two ex-slaves of

Greek origin and celebrates their legal marriage and citizenship. So here they're shown in citizen dress, but here, '*conlibertus* - fellow freed slave' records their shared status as ex-slaves. Now these slaves were not particularly powerful, we know that the husband was a *lanius* or a butcher from the Viminal Hill, but they're clearly wealthy enough to leave a substantial funerary monument to record how far they'd risen from their origins in slavery.

Ancient Rome was the first servile society in which manumission became widespread. The Romans recognised the practical benefits of providing an incentive for slaves to be industrious and obedient. And it could serve the pragmatic interests of the owner who would gain a host of skilled clients, forever in his debt.

The social mobility available to freed slaves is widely documented. They enjoyed an unprecedented opportunity to rise up through Roman society, which was not always available to poor freeborn citizens. Within the ranks of Roman freedmen there was a wide variety of economic and social status, but perhaps what would have been most important to them was their family and the children who would go on to become citizens of Rome.