

Freedmen: new citizens

Pliny's letter to Avitus

In this letter, Pliny tells his young friend Avitus a story about a dinner party where he disapproved of the behaviour of the host.

Pliny *Letters* 2.6 (translation John B. Firth)

longum est altius repetere nec refert, quemadmodum acciderit, ut homo minime familiaris cenarem apud quendam, ut sibi videbatur, lautum et diligentem, ut mihi, sordidum simul et sumptuosum. nam sibi et paucis opima quaedam, ceteris vilia et minuta ponebat. vinum etiam parvulis lagunculis in tria genera discripserat, non ut potestas eligendi, sed ne ius esset recusandi, aliud sibi et nobis, aliud minoribus amicis - nam gradatim amicos habet -, aliud suis nostrisque libertis. animadvertit qui mihi proximus recumbebat, et an probarem interrogavit. negavi. 'tu ergo' inquit 'quam consuetudinem sequeris?' 'eadem omnibus pono; ad cenam enim, non ad notam invito cunctisque rebus exaequo, quos mensa et toro aequavi.' 'etiamne libertos?' 'etiam; convictores enim tunc, non libertos puto.' et ille: 'magno tibi constat.' 'minime.' 'qui fieri potest?' 'quia scilicet liberti mei non idem quod ego bibunt, sed idem ego quod liberti.'

... igitur memento nihil magis esse vitandum quam istam luxuriae et sordium novam societatem; quae cum sint turpissima discreta ac separata, turpius iunguntur. vale.

It would be a long story--and it is of no importance--to tell you how I came to be dining--for I am no particular friend of his--with a man who thought he combined elegance with economy, but who appeared to me to be both mean and lavish, for he set the best dishes before himself and a few others and treated the rest to cheap and scrappy food. He had apportioned the wine in small decanters of three different kinds, not in order to give his guests their choice but so that they might not refuse. He had one kind for himself and us, another for his less distinguished friends--for he is a man who classifies his acquaintances--and a third for his own freedmen and those of his guests. The man who sat next to me noticed this and asked me if I approved of it. I said no. "Then how do you arrange matters?" he asked. "I set the same before all," I answered, "for I invite my friends to dine not to grade them one above the other, and those whom I have set at equal places at my board and on my couches I treat as equals in every respect." What! even the freedmen?" he said. "Yes," I replied, "for then I regard them as my guests at table, not as freedmen." He went on: "It must cost you a lot." "Not at all," said I. "Then how do you manage it?" "It's easily done; because my freedmen do not drink the same wine as I do, but I drink the same that they do."

... So remember that there is nothing you should eschew more than this new association of extravagance and meanness; they are abominable qualities when separated and single, and still more so when you get a combination of them. Farewell.

What do you make of the host attitude to freedmen? What about Pliny's?

How unusual do you think Pliny's position was?