

Freedmen: new citizens

Trimalchio

The following passages are extracts from a larger work called the *Satyricon* by Petronius. This work is a satire which narrates the experience of a guest at an extravagant dinner hosted by a successful freedman, Trimalchio.

Petronius *Satyricon* 31 (translation M. Heseltine)

... iam omnes discubuerant praeter ipsum Trimalchionem, cui locus novo more primus servabatur. ceterum in promulsidari asellus erat Corinthius cum bisaccio positus, qui habebat olivas in altera parte albas, in altera nigras. tegebant asellum duae lances, in quarum marginibus nomen Trimalchionis inscriptum erat et argenti pondus. ponticuli etiam ferruminati sustinebant gliresmelle ac papavere sparsos. fuerunt et tomacula super craticulam argenteam ferventia posita, et infra craticulam Syriaca pruna cum granis Punici mali.

... every one had now sat down except Trimalchio, who had the first place kept aside for him in the new style. A donkey in Corinthian bronze stood on the side-board, with panniers holding olives, white in one side, black in the other. Two dishes hid the donkey; Trimalchio's name and their weight in silver was engraved on their edges. There were also dormice rolled in honey and poppy-seed, and supported on little bridges soldered to the plate. Then there were hot sausages laid on a silver grill, and under the grill damsons and seeds of pomegranate.

Why do you think Trimalchio has delayed joining his guests?

With which details does Trimalchio attempt to impress his guests?

What do you think the narrator makes of Trimalchio's choices?

Petronius *Satyricon* 32 (translation M. Heseltine)

in his eramus lautitiis, cum ipse Trimalchio ad symphoniam allatus est positusque inter cervicalia minutissima expressit imprudentibus risum. pallio enim coccineo adrasum excluserat caput circaque oneratas veste cervices laticlaviam immiserat mappam fimbriis hinc atque illinc pendentibus. habebat etiam in minimo digito sinistrae manus anulum grandem subauratum, extremo vero articulo digiti sequentis minorem, ut mihi videbatur, totum aureum, sed plane ferreis veluti stellis ferruminatum. et ne has tantum ostenderet divitias, dextrum nudavit lacertum armilla aurea cultum et eboreo circulo lamina splendente conexo.

While we were engaged with these delicacies, Trimalchio was conducted in to the sound of music, propped on the tiniest of pillows. A laugh escaped the unwary. His head was shaven and peered out of a scarlet cloak, and over the heavy clothes on his neck he had put on a napkin with a broad stripe and fringes hanging from it all round. On the little finger of his left hand he had an enormous gilt ring, and on the top joint of the next finger a smaller ring which appeared to me to be entirely gold, but was really set all round with iron cut out in little stars. Not content with this display of wealth, he bared his right arm, where a golden bracelet shone, and an ivory bangle clasped with a plate of bright metal.

What do the guests make of Trimalchio's appearance?

These passages are taken from a satire.
Who do you think it's making fun of?

Can satire be a reliable historical source?



Illustration of a lavish Roman dinner party. This image, taken from Book 4 of the Cambridge Latin Course, is based on details from Petronius' Satyricon.

Further reading:

M. G. Balme (1974) *The Millionaire's Dinner Party*. Oxford. (adapted Latin text for use in classroom, including notes and comprehension help).