

Monday, 06.02.2023; 4:15 - 6:00 pm CET

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'Freedom in slavery. Inscribing slavery in the Greek East, 1c-3c CE'

Abstract:

Roman slavery is full of contradictions. On the one hand, the Roman population comprised very high numbers of slaves, subjected to unprecedented levels of institutionalised controls by which their previous identity was completely erased. Punishments for misbehaviour could be extremely severe. On the other hand, the slave system was 'open'. Slaves working in urban households had a real chance to be manumitted. They often obtained some form of education from their masters, for example as apprentices. Once freed, a slave would normally obtain citizenship and be fully integrated in society. Although scholars have often privileged either the negative side or have gone so far as to qualify Roman slavery merely as a specific form of contractual labour, it seems highly likely that the two opposite sets of characteristics were related to each other. The threat of brutal retribution underpinned the freedom slaves could have. It led to rather peculiar social dynamics between masters and slaves and patrons and freedmen.

In my lecture, I will discuss a small number of Greek funerary epigrams from the Roman period which offer insights into the agency of slaves and freedmen. These epigrams were small poems which were used as grave markers. Quite remarkably, although such texts display a clear upward social bias (conveying literacy, education, wealth, urbanity), some were made for or by slaves or ex-slaves. I argue that these epigrams show two strategies by which slavery was presented: one might be called a 'discourse of normality', by which slaves were treated as normal human beings with their own feelings, downplaying their servile status. The other discourse was one of 'benign asymmetry', by which the beneficial aspects of the unequal relationship were emphasized, stressing fidelity and patronage. These two discourses, employed by both masters and slaves, created room for negotiation and offered common ground to structure their relationship.

Bio:

Laurens E. Tacoma (1967) is Associate Professor of Ancient History at Leiden University in the Netherlands. His research focusses on Roman social history. In addition to several articles and two co-edited volumes, he has published monographs on the socio-economic position of urban elites of Roman Egypt (Brill 2006), on migration to the city of Rome (OUP 2016), and on Roman political culture (OUP 2020). He is currently preparing a monograph together with Rolf A. Tybout, entitled the World of the Greek epigram.