The sociological function of verse epitaphs for enslaved and freed people varies according to the identity of the commemorator and the nature of their relationship with the deceased. When enslaved and freed people are commemorated by their masters and patrons, their epitaphs reinforce the ideology of slavery: they emphasize the master/slave or patron/freedperson relationship while sidelining the deceased’s family and friends, praise the deceased for being useful to their master, and portray the master as benevolent (cf. AE 1946, 208). Epitaphs for enslaved and freed people composed in their own words, or by their friends and family, present a different picture, and often make negative statements about enslavement (cf. CLE 1276). The verse epitaph, therefore, constituted a space in which different social groups could express different perspectives on slavery and patronage.

The master’s perspective (AE 1946, 208)

Points of interest

• ‘Ventriloquizing’ of deceased: the epitaph is written in the voice of the deceased, Tintuleia Musa, although the tomb and epitaph were created by her patron Sextus. This gives the impression that Musa is endorsing the statements made in the epitaph.

• Benevolence of patron: Sextus is portrayed as kind and generous. We are told that he granted Musa funeral rites (funerum amplio, 3) as well as this monument, which brings with it public renown (effe[ct] me felicem mortuam | ut dicant omnes, 5-6). He is also said to have displayed grief at Musa’s death (lacrums, 4).

• Idea of ‘good freedwoman’: Musa is praised for pleasing her patron and fulfilling her obligations to him (placuisse me patrono | monimentum indicat, 2; per frequentem gratiam, 3; ut dicant omnes quod | patri[on]o placuerim, 6).

• Sidelining of deceased’s family: We are told nothing about Musa’s life beyond her relationship with her patron, and her family members are not mentioned.

Conclusion: Musa’s epitaph presents a model of the ideal patron-freedperson relationship in which the patron is benevolent and the freedperson is obedient and dutiful towards him. The prospect of commemoration is used as an incentive to encourage other freedpeople viewing the monument to demonstrate the same behavior. Musa’s epitaph thus reflects the perspective of the slave-owner and reinforces the ideology of slavery.

The freedman’s perspective (CLE 1276 = CIL XII 5026)

Points of interest

• Negative view of slavery: Ofillius calls his enslavement “undeserved” (servito | | ingenium ut flec|t|et eret, 3).

• Psychological trauma of slavery: Ofillius says slavery was imposed on him “to bend his spirit” (ingen[en]ium ut f|ec|t|et eret, 3).

• Physical violence of slavery: Ofillius says he had to “conquer” or “overcome” his master so as not to be subjected to physical violence (offic[i]c]s vic[t] | [do]minum nec verbera sens[it], 7-8).

• Difficulty of obtaining freedom: Ofillius states that he asked for his freedom but did not receive it, and ultimately had to buy it (pretio | obt[i]nui quod prec[e] | non valuit, 6-7).

• Struggles after manumission: Ofillius suggests that, even after being freed, he had a difficult life with few material rewards (ut potui s[i]bi nomen adaux[i], 5).

• Struggles after freedom: Ofillius says that, even after being freed, he had a difficult life with few material rewards (ut potui s[i]bi nomen adaux[i], 5).

• Prominence of family: Ofillius begins the epitaph by naming his wife and son (contrast the epitaph of Tintuleia Musa, above, which does not mention her family). Scholars have suggested that the emphasis placed on family relationships in inscriptions by freedpeople may be an emotional response to enslavement, under which they could not form legally recognized marriages and family units (cf. Mouritsen 2005; Bodel 2017).

Conclusion: Ofillius’ epitaph challenges the picture of slavery and patronage constructed by the patrons (which we can observe in Musa’s epitaph above) by portraying the experience of slavery as traumatic, the life of the freedman as difficult, and the support of the master or patron as non-existent.

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