Cultural Assimilation and Identity Formation of Freedmen in the Roman Provinces: Case Studies from Gaul and Egypt

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Abstract: This essay discusses the cultural assimilation and identity formation of free people in Roman Gaul and the Egyptian provinces. Through comparative analyses, the article explores how freed people navigated new social roles and developed hybrid identities influenced by Roman, Celtic and Egyptian cultures. In Gaul, the freedmen underwent a mixed process of Romanisation and cultural exchange that resulted in the formation of a Roman-Celtic identity, especially among the elite. In contrast, Egyptian freedmen maintained a strong attachment to their native culture, despite widespread Roman and Hellenistic influences. The critical factors of urbanisation, socio-economic status and legal constraints shaped the distinctive identity trajectories of the freedmen in these provinces, providing insights into the complex interplay between power, identity and cultural integration in the Roman world. Overall, the cultural assimilation and identity formation of freed people in Roman Gaul and the Egyptian provinces highlight the complexity of cultural integration across different regions. By examining these processes, we gain deeper insights into the interplay between power, identity, and cultural adaptation within the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Roman provinces, cultural assimilation, Roman Empire.

1.   Introduction

Ancient Roman slavery differed from the modern form, mostly since it was not founded on racial differences. However, similar to later forms, it degraded and abused the victims and was commonly typified by cruelty. Roman slavery had an established history in different Roman provinces, including Gaul and Egypt, with most slaves being foreigners including those captured outside these jurisdictional areas, sailors sold by pirates, and prisoners of war [1, 2]. Slaves also included children sold off by Roman citizens to raise money. All slaves within these provinces belonged to their owners who had the liberty to rent or sell them to other owners. They also faced different forms of cruelty including being murdered mercilessly, whipped, and made to undergo other forms of mistreatment. While slavery and the slave trade were established in Roman provinces, some of the Roman leaders, such as Seneca, advocated for their right to humane treatment. Slave men and women worked in different areas across the provinces, including within households, farms, factories, and mines, gaining progressive similarities with the Romans and their masters and slowly integrating into the wider population as they acquired better jobs and status, including working as engineers on buildings, aqueducts, and roads [1, 2].

Over time, slaves had the opportunity to gain freedom as freedmen in various Roman provinces, including Egypt and Gaul, a process that was known as manumission [3, 4]. The deepening interaction with elitist culture of Romans gave freedmen and freeborn inhabitants within these Roman provinces a higher chance at manumission, and with their imitation of Roman cultures, cultural assimilation and identity formation was established [3]. This paper assesses identity formation and cultural assimilation of freedmen within Roman provinces of Egypt and Gaul. The development of cultural identities through assimilation among freedmen or former slaves within Gaul and Egypt was inspired by the liberal interaction with the broader Roman cultures which, with time, offered a means of interaction and citizenship for those who underwent formal manumission.

2. Cultural Assimilation and Identity Formation of Freedmen in the Roman Provinces

As the Late Republic ended, and as the Roman Empire gained more territory, freedmen were viewed through different lenses by law. They were generally supported by the culture and society, including their former owners, alongside the law [3]. This era of manumission was characterised by approaches such as former slave owners caring for the freedmen and freeborn inhabitants as this bore a symbol of established pseudo-filial roles with the former masters. The Augustus law that was instituted in the Roman Empire was expanded not primarily against the release of more freedmen into society, but it focused more on ensuring only the 'best' persons were legally allowed to gain citizenship, thereby responding to the escalating apprehensions from the Roman elite that a considerable number of felonious freedmen could join society, which they considered underserved [5]. During the manumission period, the lives of the Freedmen improved considerably even for those who were already integrated into society through opportunities such as engineering Roman infrastructure and working closely with the elites.

However, macula servitutis, the stain of slavery, was considered an indelible mark on former slaves, denying most freedmen the opportunity to access higher positions in society [5]. Still, Freedmen received a high level of honour and respect in their respective societies, particularly those who acquired legal or formal manumission as showcased by the erection of numerous monuments and epitaphs across the former Roman provinces, including Egypt and Gaul [5]. Most of the freedmen's gravestones showed different forms of identity formation and cultural assimilation linked to their former masters, including established associations and relationships. This form of identity formation was pivotal for many freedmen since it established a basis of respect within their provinces or society. Cultural assimilation and the formation of identities for freedmen in such provinces were also characterised by tense moments, where, while being recognised as part of the broader Roman society through acculturation, they were still considered as having a myriad of social disabilities or disadvantages compared to the native Romans.

2.1. Cultural Assimilation and Identity Formation of Freedmen in Egypt

The interactions of freedmen with their former patrons or owners for extended periods, some lasting generations, were foundational in assimilating them culturally as well as establishing their latter identities within the Roman province of Egypt. During the first and second centuries, as well as part of the third century, the number of slaves in the Roman province of Egypt was less than 10% of the entire population, excluding the capital Alexandria, whereby the population was closer to 12.5% or more [1]. The contribution of slave men and women to the production industry and crafts sector was minimal, and while being allocated jobs such as messengers, forest guards, and donkey herders within the rural establishments of Egypt, they were not widely employed in the agricultural sector [1]. Towards the third century and afterwards, enslavement increasingly diminished in the Roman province of Egypt, costing slave-owners more to purchase and keep slaves, and with the growing

slave prices, people began offering their children into slavery for monetary compensation. The trend of the nature of jobs occupied by slaves was considerably similar to the previous centuries, with most employed as domestic workers, with few numbers being in the agricultural and industrial sectors [1]. Later, pottery workshops and bakeries were established by freedmen and the freeborn.

Egyptian freedmen were accorded a low legal status among other civilians across the growing Roman Empire mostly because the leadership considered them unsuitable for integration into civilised urban life. With the progressive development of their unique identity given the decline of slavery and slave trade in Egypt, the freedmen had developed a culture of rioting and lawlessness, which was considered leftist by the majority of the articulate classes in the empire [6]. The freedmen also openly opposed the advancement of 'Hellenism' or 'Hellenization' which comprised the proliferation of the Greek culture (including their identity, language, and religion) under the influence and leadership of Alexander the Great in the 4th century [6]. Egyptian freedmen considered such a move as debilitating to their identity and culture. While religion and language bore crucial importance to the identity formation and cultural assimilation of Greeks and Egyptians, the development of the two was inherently opposed [6]. The Egyptian freedmen under Herodotus affirmed their Egyptian ancestry and identity as a founding aspect of their relationship with the land, holding that one could be assimilated into Greek identity through education, but being part of the Egyptian culture was only through one's association with the land or as a descendant from the land.

While kinship or common ancestry was not of top importance in establishing the freedmen's identity formation (excluding their deeply held beliefs about their connection with their land), they perceived cultural changes as intrusive, resulting in mounting rebellion. During the Ptolemaic era, Egyptian identity formation among the freedmen was mostly expressed through visual culture, nomenclature, language, and formalised status [6]. Accordingly, the ethnic bases of the latter part of the Ptolemaic era, including the katoikoi, the inhabitants of Egyptian lands, remained undistinguished from other Roman provinces that were less successful in terms of new identity formations and cultural assimilation. Additionally, freedmen who opted to join civil service or the military largely maintained their Egyptian cultural heritage despite the influence of Hellenism or other forms of social pressure, resulting in a form of dualized cultural identity especially for the settlers. The influence of Egyptian identity formation and the cultural assimilation of the katoikoi among the freedmen was also evident in other cultural areas such as intermarriages, whereby most women would maintain their Egyptian ancestry [6, 7].

Alexandrians and Romans were not fully detached from their respective 'chora' or space/land of origin, an aspect that helped them maintain their commercial and cultural identities [8]. While there were no definitive distinctions between the Egyptians, Greeks, and Roman, there were established differentiations in the Roman province of Egypt, whereby their identity formation and culture, including commercial associations as well as religious and social attributes established a sense of distinctiveness for freedmen in Egypt [9]. In cases where cultural assimilation or acculturation occurred, it was influential among both Egyptian freedmen and the Romans and Greeks. For instance, Roman law was against marriages between close kin, thereby prohibiting intermarriages between the freedmen and the Alexandrians, Romans, and other Egyptians, a factor that influenced identity formation among these groups as well as their cultural assimilation [8]. However, illicit and incestuous unions occurred among the freedmen and other groups, later shaping their acculturation to Roman and Alexandrian ways of life.

Roman Egypt also featured aspects of biculturalism which was often showcased in the materiality displayed by different populations. Urbanisation was a key influence in establishing biculturalism among freedmen, with the Romans inspiring urban development through their military presence [10]. In the First Century as the Roman conquest in Egypt progressed, the Roman leaders ended some of the neighbourhoods that were recognised during the Ptolemaic era, such as Gymnasia, intending to

grow Greek and Roman influence [8]. The Romans sought to establish Hellenism as the basis of identity formation, but there was a push to maintain aspects of Egyptian culture and identity, especially their religious institutions, such as temples. Thus, while the freedmen in the Roman province of Egypt were used to maintaining much of their cultural identity, biculturalism was increasingly common with the influence of Romans and Greeks, especially with the sprawl of urbanisation in Egyptian localities.

Conversely, Hellenism progressed as the early second century began, alongside infrastructural development. Egyptian and Graeco-Roman places of worship were being controlled by the elite Romans, establishing centres for new identity formation for the local freedmen, thereby influencing their cultural assimilation [8]. Different activities held by the Romans and Greek settlers, such as architectural festivals and forms, also helped in shaping the identity formation of freedmen in Egypt, seeking to establish a sense of local community belongingness. These festivals and forms which were mostly based on Egyptian traditions and Graeco-Roman cultures helped establish different identities among the freedmen, with a considerable number leaning towards biculturalism, while others were assimilated into the Roman culture to help them integrate more with the Roman developments.

Overall, the identity formation and cultural assimilation among the freedman in Egypt leaned more towards maintaining Egyptian culture rather than the Roman and Greek cultures. The elitist leaders who had adopted Hellenism were pivotal in maintaining the religious traditions of the Egyptians and were backed by the Alexandrians and Romans, especially those in the chora [8, 11]. For example, the leaders focused on maintaining the religious basis of the Egyptians and the freedmen, such as the construction of Arsinoe Souchos temple through contributions from Alexandrians and Romans. New places of worship for Egyptian freedmen were also constructed, allowing the occupation of traditional local cultures/cults, such as the Isis temple at Taposiris [8]. Both elite metropolites and settling Romans considered the local temples and cultures as a part of their identity and culture, while also sharing their cultural heritage of urban infrastructural development and deity syncretism [12]. These collective efforts to promote and maintain the local cultures of the freedmen and other Egyptians indicate the emphasis placed on identity formation and cultural establishment of the local communities in entirety.

2.2. Cultural Assimilation and Identity Formation of Freedmen in Gaul

Gaul was a Roman province under the occupation of ancient Gauls, who were mostly Celtic people, covering regions of the modern-day states of north Italy, west Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Netherlands, and France. The region was under the rulership of Julius Caesar, under the Roman regions of Aquitania, Belgica, and Gallia Celtica [13, 14]. Epigraphic evidence indicates the influence of Roman rule on Gaul, including their influence on the identity formation and cultural assimilation of freedmen [1]. As the Roman Empire expanded through Gaul, the identities of the inhabitants, later becoming slaves and ultimately freedmen, underwent considerable reforms [15]. The liberti or freed slaves, mostly comprising of outsiders and Celtics/ancient Gauls, were mandated to position themselves within Roman rulership guidelines, thereby adopting ideologies and other aspects of Roman culture [15]. Across Gaul, most freedmen were still considered to be of low social value despite their efforts to become acculturated and assimilated into the Roman identities. To establish their identity, freedmen established association with slaves and freeborn Romans, thereby developing deeper relationships. However, freedmen were still considered to lack definitive ethnic and cultural identities as most of these were lost when they became enslaved. Thus, while being considered as legal Roman citizens, they held on to their slavery ties as a remembrance of their identity and as a basis of their identity formation.

Freedmen in the Roman province of Gaul was largely considered to have Roman identities, both culturally and by name, especially since they had undergone considerable cultural assimilation.

Freedmen were also expected to be thankful to their former patrons for gaining freedom and being inculcated into the Roman culture, while also sharing the outcomes of their labour [15]. The early Roman Empire in Gaul was pivotal in establishing the cultural identity and process of assimilating slaves and freedmen based on Roman legislation. The manumission laws by Augustus, particularly Fufia Caninia and Aelia Sentia, were adopted across Gaul to minimise the proliferation of freedmen who were of foreign descent, thereby restricting the number of slaves that could be freed at any given time by their masters as well as defining the circumstances of manumission [15]. For example, slaves were required to have reached the age of thirty except in certain situations where masters wanted to leave their wealth to their former slaves as heirs. The manumission processes were also strictly controlled by local justices, equestrians, and senatorial councils. For slaves to gain freedom as freedmen, they had to show, over time, that they were of good behaviour, accultured, and assimilable into the Roman culture and identity. Thus, having spent considerable time as slaves under their masters, being assimilated into Roman identity and culture, as well as the requirement to uphold Roman-based identity upon gaining freedom as freedmen meant that most of these individuals continued practising Roman culture and way of life, including religion, food, and other aspects of their lives.

The expansion of the Roman Empire in ancient Gaul in the mid-first century BC was initially a military-led insurgence but developed into an established cultural hegemony over the inhabiting populations, aimed at assimilating them culturally and giving them new identities. However, cultural assimilation among the Celtic people, the main inhabitants of ancient Gaul, was not full as the Romans considered the Celtic cultures as comparable to theirs, often resulting in bi-directional cultural exchanges and the establishment of mixed cultures, such as Romano-Celtic, creating a basis for later identity formation and cultural assimilation processes for former slaves in the region [16]. Roman imperialism was first established in Gaul via conquests and military insurgence in 60 BC under Sulla's leadership. Sulla never primarily focused on developing Roman influence beyond Hellenism, but his military insurgence created precedence for establishing a basis for cultural assimilation for the conquered populations, including the later slaves and freedmen. Later leaders such as Julius Caesar sought to expand their military hegemony across modern-day Europe, thereby progressively establishing cultural dominance by the Romans [17].

While most of the Celtics; including the elites, peasants, and former slaves (freedmen) generally embraced considerable aspects of the Roman culture, bi-directional cultural mixing was also evident. Thus, in most of Gaul, Romanisation largely shifted from the normal unidirectional process practised in most other Roman provinces, such as Egypt, whereby Roman culture was imposed upon the colonised populations (including slaves and freedmen) towards cultural exchange within different socioeconomic contexts. Thus, cultural assimilation was not vehemently imposed upon freedmen in Gaul, but various aspects of the Roman culture were openly adopted as advantageous by the Gaul society [18, 16]. This means that identity formation and the development of 'Gaulian' freedmen culture were founded on cultural exchanges between the Romans and the Celts, with the primary goal of optimising socioeconomic status and standing, thereby resulting in mixed Roman-Celtic cultural identities.

The level of cultural assimilation, cultural exchange, and the resulting identity formation among the freedmen in Gaul was also dependent on the nature of the socioeconomic group freedmen were in. Most of the Celtic freedmen fell into two primary social categories, the commoners, consisting of people from lower socioeconomic classes without any leadership influence (including slaves and former slave men), and the societal elites, constituting of the ruling class within the military, tribal, and religious levels (which could include established freedmen who had progressively gained status) [16]. The elites and the commoners embodied different levels of Romanisation, thereby being assimilated culturally at different levels and ultimately forming diverse identities [18]. For instance,

after the Roman occupancy of Gaul, the elites mostly adopted the Roman culture as an opportunity to maintain their social status, including embracing Roman identity, laws, social dynamics, and political approaches [19, 16].

On the other hand, the commoners, including recently freed slaves/freedmen were largely unimpacted by the political and cultural influences of the Romans, with most being guided by the Gaul culture, laws, and regulations as opposed to Roman law, including established norms such as retribution by blood for certain wrongdoings and following the local polytheistic religions rather than the Hellenised religions adopted by the elites [19, 16].

However, in some cases, the commoners/freedmen also took advantage of cultural exchanges with the Romans, especially in cases involving socioeconomic opportunities and growth, resulting in mixed Roman-Celtic cultural identities among them.

3.   Conclusion

Cultural assimilation and the formation of identities among freedmen in the Roman provinces of Egypt and Gaul show considerable contrast, especially considering the different levels of adoption of the Roman culture. For instance, in Egypt, while kinship or common ancestry was not of major importance in establishing the freedmen's identity formation, they perceived cultural changes as intrusive, resulting in mounting rebellions. During the Ptolemaic era, Egyptian identity formation among the freedmen was mostly expressed through visual culture, nomenclature, language, and formalised status. However, Roman Egypt also depicted a form of cultural assimilation and identity formation for the freedmen through aspects such as Roman urbanisation which led to various forms of biculturalism, but most of the freedmen in Egypt sought to maintain Egyptian culture rather than Roman and Greek cultures such as the practice of Hellenism. On the other hand, freedmen in the Roman province of Gaul were largely considered to have Roman identities, both culturally and by name, especially since they had undergone considerable cultural assimilation. However, Romanisation in Gaul largely shifted from the normal unidirectional process practiced in most other Roman provinces, such as Egypt, whereby Roman culture was imposed upon the colonised populations towards cultural exchange within different socioeconomic contexts. Cultural assimilation and exchange, and the resultant identity formation were also influenced by the socioeconomic standing of the freedmen, whereby those in higher social strata appeared more assimilated than the commoners, including recently freed slaves.

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