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SECRETARY'S & EDITOR'S ADDRESS
Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies
Stockholm University
SE-106 91 Stockholm
secretary@ecsi.se | editor@ecsi.se

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LISA HAGELIN

Commending a freedman

Virtues and masculinities in the recommendation letters of Cicero and Pliny the Younger

Abstract

This article explores Roman freedmen's masculine positions expressed as virtues, qualities, and ideals in the recommendation letters of Cicero and Pliny the Younger. It discusses whether there were specific freedman virtues, qualities, and ideals and what consequences their existence or absence had for freedmen's constructions of masculinity. A critical close reading of the texts is applied, combined with theories of masculinity, where hegemonic masculinity is a key concept. It is concluded that there were no virtues or qualities that were specific or exclusive to freedmen. A distinct set of virtues for freedmen did not exist in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome, since much the same behaviour and qualities are seen as manly and desirable for freedmen as for freeborn male citizens of high birth. However, freedmen cannot comply with the hegemonic masculinity in full, since they cannot embody the Roman masculine ideal of the *vir bonus* and cannot be associated with the Roman cardinal virtue *virtus*, which was central in the construction of masculinity in the Roman world. This illustrates the complex Roman gender discourse and, on the whole, the social complexity of Roman society.*

Keywords: Roman freedmen, Pliny the Younger, Cicero, virtues, gender, hegemonic masculinity, recommendation letters

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> *Dionysium flagrantem desiderio tui misi ad te, nec mehercule aequo animo, sed fuit concedendum. Quem quidem cognovi cum doctum, quod mihi iam ante erat notum, tum sanctum, plenum offici, studiosum etiam meae laudis, frugi hominem, ac, ne libertinum laudare videar, plane virum bonum.*
>
> I am sending you Dionysius, who is on fire with impatience to see you; reluctantly I must say, but I had to agree. I have found him not only a good scholar, which I already knew, but upright, serviceable, zealous moreover for my good name, an honest fellow, and in case that sounds too much like commending a freedman, a good man.[1]

In this letter of recommendation, Cicero seems to imply that there is some kind of standard vocabulary when commending freedmen. However, since Dionysius is special to him, he wants to heighten the praise and calls the freedman *vir bonus*, "a good man", instead of using merely the expression *homo frugi*, "an honest fellow".

Many scholars have claimed that there were certain habits and ideals that were exclusive to freedmen, which made them appear as a separate and distinctive group in Roman society. One example is the use of a kind of language, a "freedman language" and the use of metaphors and fables among this group.[2] Epigraphic and iconographic studies have shown that freedmen and slaves had values and ideals that were not shared by the Roman élite, e.g. that they were proud of their work and that this was "a source of identity and status"; thus, they had an occupational identity that was specific to this group.[3] Drawing on literary and epigraphic material, scholars

* Acknowledgement is due to Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences), which financed the research. I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable critiques. Any remaining errors are my own.

[1] Cic. *Att*. 7.4.1. Transl. Shackleton Bailey 1999, modified. My translation: "good man". Shackleton Bailey: "a really fine man".

[2] E.g. Marchesi 2005.

[3] Clarke 2003; George 2006; Huttunen 1974; Joshel 1992; Kampen 1981 (citation 135); Petersen 2006. See also Mouritsen 2013 on epigra-

have argued that there was a certain set of virtues connected to freedmen, which expressed ideals and social norms of the freed group. In his seminal *The freedman in the Roman world*, Henrik Mouritsen claims that "[p]raise of freedmen generally invoked a specific set of virtues" and here *fides* (fidelity) was the "key virtue of a freedman".[4] Other such virtues were *modestia* (modesty), *industria* (activity), *officium* (duty), and the adjectives *probus* (able, honest) and *bonus* (good).[5] In addition, it has been stated that the Roman cardinal virtue *virtus* (male courage, manliness) could not be associated with slaves and freedmen.[6]

The present study explores Roman freedmen's masculine positions expressed as virtues, qualities, and ideals in Cicero's (106–43 BC) and Pliny the Younger's (AD 61–*c.* 113) letters of recommendation. My aim is to discuss whether there were certain virtues, qualities, and ideals that were specific to freedmen and what the existence or absence of such virtues, qualities, and ideals tells us about freedmen's masculinity and how they were positioned in relation to the masculine ideal of the Roman élite. The article addresses these questions by undertaking a critical close reading of a sample of letters of Cicero and Pliny the Younger, applying masculinity theory. No attempt will be made to provide a comprehensive examination of all freedman-related words in the letters of Cicero and Pliny, but a selection of words and letters has been made. I have chosen to present material that best illustrates discourses on ideals and masculinity, using partly a special case and partly representative examples.

As regards masculinity theory, Raewyn Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" is used as a key concept in this study. This theoretical framework helps towards an understanding of how an ideal and normative Roman man ought to behave and who could embody the social construction of ideal masculinity in the Late Republican and Early Imperial Roman society.[7] Applying masculinity theory in this way is a new approach; apart from my research,[8] it has never been used to study Roman freedmen, as previous studies on Roman masculinity have largely focused on the élite and their conceptions and embodiment of masculinity.[9] Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the views that are presented within these texts are the views of the élite, and their perceptions of the freedmen and their abilities to construct masculinity. The views of the freedmen themselves cannot be obtained from these sources. What is more, the authors' "true feelings" cannot be detected in these sources as the letters were often revised and polished before publication and the letters are very much a product of genre. Thus, the texts can be seen as expressions of a dominant and normative discourse on virtues and masculinity in the context of recommendation letters. Writing letters of recommendation was part of the everyday duties of the élite Roman man and especially of officials working for the state.[10] These letters were essential for the system of reciprocity between high status men in exchanging favours, but they were also common between parties of unequal status.[11] The letters were often standardized in form, following an established scheme of themes, and they often contained standard epithets.[12] As a consequence, it is often problematic to draw conclusions regarding the personal relationship between the recommender and the person commended. Hence, focus must be on the style, that is, the wording of the letters, when using them as a source.

To begin with, I will briefly explain theories of hegemonic masculinity and define Roman hegemonic masculinity as well as other, subordinate, masculinities, as I will use these concepts to understand and discuss the masculine positions of Roman freedmen. I will start with a study of Cicero's letters, and follow with a study of Pliny's letters. In so doing, apart from studying virtues and exploring masculine positions in the texts, I will also address the two following questions: are there differences between the two authors, and can we discern any changes in ideals over time? The concluding part of the article seeks to answer these questions, drawing attention to the complex cultural Roman gender discourse.

Hegemonic masculinity and other masculinities in Roman society

Hegemonic masculinity was first theorized by Connell in her *Gender and power*,[13] and according to James Messerschmidt was conceptualized as "a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates

phy and Borg 2012, Laird 2006, and Leach 2006 on iconography. See e.g. Verboven 2012 on the central role of freedmen for the Italian economy of the Late Republic and Early Empire. However, it is important to remember that not all workers in Roman society were slaves or freedmen. According to Flohr, scholars have tended to emphasize "economic agents of servile or freed status" although there existed freeborn craftsmen and traders as well, Flohr 2017, 162. For workers of free status, see e.g. Garnsey 1980; Treggiari 1980.

[4] Mouritsen 2011, 61. Cf. Treggiari 1969, 81.

[5] Fabre 1981, 232–242; MacLean 2018, 35–72; Mouritsen 2011, 61–65.

[6] Fabre 1981, 262; Hagelin 2019; McDonnell 2006, 159–161; Mouritsen 2011, 62.

[7] See Griffin 2018 for a discussion on how historians can use the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

[8] Hagelin 2019; 2020.

[9] Foxhall & Salmon 1998a; 1998b; Gleason 1995; Gunderson 2000. McDonnell 2006, 166, addresses this problem without discussing it.

[10] See e.g. Thraede 1970, 125–129.

[11] Lendon 1997, 62–69; White 2018.

[12] Cugusi 1983, 111–114.

[13] Connell 1987.

unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities".[14] It was further refined by Connell and Messerschmidt,[15] who defined hegemonic masculinity as a masculinity constructed in relation to four non-hegemonic masculinities: complicit, subordinate, marginalized, and protest masculinities. The concept "masculinity" does not represent a certain type of man; rather, it is a way that men position themselves through discursive practices. The hegemonic group usually sees members of the subordinate masculinity groups as inferior and inadequate in some way. Nevertheless, the "complicit" masculinity group contributes to the existence of the hegemonic masculinity by supporting, emulating, and idealizing it. Hegemonic masculinity is normative, even though only a minority of men really enacts it, as it is seen as "the most honoured way of being a man" and "it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it".[16] Hegemonic masculinity must be understood neither as a fixed character type nor as a fixed, transhistorical model. Rather, hegemonic masculinity is the masculinity that upholds the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position that can always be questioned. Hegemonic masculinity is always subject to change and older forms of masculinities can be displaced by new ones, and also non-hegemonic patterns of masculinities can be incorporated into the hegemonic. Thus, it is a cultural ideal that can change according to time and space.[17]

Masculinity is defined relationally, that is, in relation to the feminine, but, as described above, it is also constructed in relation to other men. Manhood needs "constant validation; its pursuit is relentless", to use Michael Kimmel's words.[18] This constant validation has to be attained from other men.[19] Accordingly, masculinity can be seen as a homosocial enactment, as a man runs the risk of being seen as a "womanly" or an "unmanly" man by other men.[20] Activity, reason, and control (of one's body as well as mind) are central concepts when constructing gender, as action and control are traditionally associated with men, whereas women are often stereotyped as passive and unable to control their emotions.[21] The desire to control oneself as well as others is, in fact, essential for many modern men's sense of their masculinity, and this is often manifested in sexual practices.[22]

In Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome, hegemonic masculinity belonged to the élite and the public sphere, as masculinity was defined by public performances. Roman hegemonic masculinity involved issues of body, dress, sexuality, rhetorical education, social performance, and competition, and it was constantly judged and scrutinized by other men.[23] Therefore, in many ways, it complies with how hegemonic masculinity is constructed and enacted in a modern society.

Roman hegemonic masculinity was embodied by the *vir bonus*, where the adjective *bonus* meant good in a moral sense, but stood for wealth and social standing as well.[24] The noun *vir* had positive connotations; it was often used when praising someone and was almost exclusively applied to men of a higher standing, as is shown in the seminal study of Francesca Santoro L'Hoir.[25] In Cicero, *vir* is closely connected to people who are active participants in public life and in politics.[26] *Vir* was used for men of the élite, and, apart from its signification "adult male", it could also mean soldier or husband, expressing authority, responsibility, and independence. Hence, in Roman society, a *vir* was a "real man" with *auctoritas*, who dominated women, children, and other men of lower status.[27] In fact, in *Tusc*. 2.55 Cicero tells us that a *vir* must never act in a "slavish" or "womanish" way, *serviliter* or *muliebriter*.[28] According to Cicero in *Tusc*. 2.53, being a man "is to be master of yourself". Cicero is distancing himself from slavish and womanish men and his words can be seen as descriptions of his masculine position, a position that was of special importance for a *homo novus* like Cicero. In *Cat*. 3.12, Cicero uses the expression "show oneself as a man", "*Cura ut vir sis!*", and *vir* is here closely connected to showing *virtus*.[29] Consequently, the noun *vir* expresses gender as social status, since not every male is a *vir*, but only those who can embody the Roman masculine ideal of the élite.[30] Men who did not exhibit or strive for *virtus* were not seen as *viri*, instead they were *homines*, according to

[14] Messerschmidt 2018, 28.
[15] Connell 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2012. The concept has been applied by many scholars in different contexts, but it has also been criticized, see e.g. Demetriou 2001; Whitehead 2002, 88–96.
[16] Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 832.
[17] Connell 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005.
[18] Kimmel 1990, 100.
[19] Kimmel 1994, 128–129; Whitehead 2007, 380. As Kimmel expresses it: "We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance", Kimmel 1994, 128.
[20] Connell 1995; Kimmel 1994, 128–129.
[21] Lloyd 1984, 2; Petersen 1998, 51; Whitehead 2002, 190.
[22] Whitehead 2002, 165–168; see e.g. Petersen 1998, 41–71 on the male body and masculinity.
[23] McDonnell 2006, 165–166; this is illustrated in the studies of Connolly 1998; 2007; Edwards 1997; Gleason 1995; Gunderson 2000; Olson 2014; 2017; Richlin 1997a.
[24] Gunderson 2000, 7–8, 61. See further Hellegouarc'h 1963, 485–493 on the *vir bonus* as a member of the *boni*.
[25] Santoro L'Hoir 1992.
[26] Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 11–15, 158. This can be seen in Pliny as well since he "uses some of the same gender expressions with their accompanying politically-oriented adjectives", Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 148.
[27] Hagelin 2019, 201. Cf. Alston 1998, 205–209.
[28] Cf. Cic. *Tusc*. 2.51: "*Cave turpe quidquam, languidum, non virile*", "beware of anything immoral, loose, unmanly".
[29] Cf. Verg. *Aen*. 1.1; Livy 25.18.11.
[30] Cf. Walters 1997, 32.

the histories of Livy and Sallust.[31] The noun *homo* meant man, but *homo* had lower connotations than *vir* and it was often applied to men of lower rank, such as freedmen.[32] However, *homo* could also be used in a neutral sense, meaning merely "human being".[33]

In Roman society, gender was constructed through dichotomies such as hardness/softness, moderation/excess, activity/passivity, sexual penetration/being sexually penetrated, and embracing all of these, domination/submission.[34] Drawing on the dichotomies activity/passivity, sexual penetration/being sexually penetrated, and domination/submission, sexual practices could be perceived as articulations of power.[35] Power and control of self and others were essential concepts to the Roman masculine ideology and sexual penetration played a key role in the semantics of gender, as the feminine was associated with the passive sexual role of being penetrated, whereas the real man, the *vir*, was the active penetrator.[36] The penetration of the woman was seen as an expression of subordination, in that she had to endure something beyond her control, as is expressed by the passive verb *patior*, meaning "suffer", "undergo", or "experience", and thus is used for "being penetrated".[37] The expression "*pati muliebria*", "having a woman's experience" or "suffer like a woman", could therefore be used to describe a man who was penetrated by another man.[38]

Men who were penetrated (orally as well as anally) were identified as womanly or "unmen", since they were seen as passive and thus subordinate in the same way as women.[39] A Roman man who was penetrated and/or did not embody the normative masculine ideal in other ways, such as dress and/or behaviour, could be called *effeminatus*, *mollis*,[40] or, even worse, *pathicus* or *cinaedus*.[41] These words all have negative associations (although their significance is slightly unclear) and they are only used to describe others.[42] According to Roman common opinion, men and women must be distinguished by clothing and an effeminate appearance was not appropriate for a man's dignity.[43] Crossing gender boundaries in this area was often censured and ridiculed. For example, an élite man could be ridiculed for wearing a tunic girded too short, since this was associated with slaves and their sexual availability.[44] In fact, male slaves could be seen to occupy the same sexual passive and subordinate position as women did. They could be referred to as boys, *pueri*, a word that in this context expresses sexual availability.[45] This is also illustrated by the notion that a woman who was anally penetrated could be perceived as "taking the part of a '*puer*'", as expressed in e.g. Mart. 9.67.3 ("*illud puerile*").[46] Thus, the ideals defining sexual relations and practices articulate the Roman gender discourse as the penetrated partner, whether a woman or a boy,[47] cannot be perceived as a "real" man, a position that was reserved for impenetrable men.[48] Sexual acts were seen as expressions of power and it was of crucial importance that the master was the penetrative and active part in a relationship between a master and a slave.[49]

The fact that the male slave did not have any rights over his own body, and was his master's or mistress' tool, including sexu-

[31] E.g. Sall. *Iug.* 85.38, see Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 47–76, for further references and discussion.

[32] McDonnell 2006, 159–160. Cf. Mouritsen 2011, 61–65, 98. See Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 16–18, 158–159, 165, 201–202 (epigraphic evidence) for references. See Hagelin 2020 for a discussion on the importance of age and being seen as a man for Roman freedmen.

[33] Santoro L'Hoir 1992.

[34] Williams 2010, 156.

[35] Green 2015; Parker 1997; Walters 1997; Williams 2010. See further e.g. Dover 1978; Edwards 1993, 70–78; Foucault 1985; Halperin 1990; Richlin 1983; 1993; 1997b; Skinner 1979. Richlin points out that the connection between power and sexual roles/practices was discussed by her as well as Skinner in advance of Foucault and his followers, Richlin 1991, 173.

[36] Williams 2010, 136, 139; 2014.

[37] In Sen. *Ep*. 95.2 it is stated that women were "born to be penetrated", "*pati natae*".

[38] E.g. *Dig*. 3.1.1.6; Sall. *Cat*. 13.3; Tac. *Ann*. 11.36.4; Parker 1997, 49–50; Richlin 1993, 531; Walters 1997, 31.

[39] Parker 1997, 49–50; Richlin 1993, 531; Walters 1997, 31. Walters 1993 uses the terms "unmen" or "not fully men" for slaves, youths, eunuchs, and passive males. Cf. Walters 1998. However, Kamen & Levin-Richardson 2014 reminds us that the connection active-penetrator and passive-penetrated is sometimes misleading since not all penetrated individuals are in fact passive.

[40] Olson 2017, 135. On softness, *mollitia*, as an "antithesis of masculinity", Williams 2010, 139–140. Cf. e.g. Gunderson 2000, 81–82; Fredrick 2002. For the concept *mollitia* see also Olson 2017, 156 n. 22 (references to modern studies), 166 n. 140; Edwards 1993, 63–97, 174.

[41] Olson 2017, 136. *Pathicus* see e.g. Williams 2010, 193 for references. The discussion on *cinaedus* is extensive, for ancient Rome see e.g. Edwards 1993, 63–84; McDonnell 2006; Richlin 1993; Walters 1998, 356; Williams 2010, 177–245.

[42] See Richlin 1993 for a discussion of the fact that we do not have the voice of the *cinaedus* himself.

[43] As the words in e.g. Cic. *Off*. 1.130 show: "*viro non dignus ornatus*".

[44] Petron. *Sat*. 60.8; Hor. *Sat.* 1.2.25–26; Olson 2017, 142–143. See Corbeill 1997; Harlow 2004 and Olson 2017 for further discussion on dress and masculinity.

[45] This is true for its female counterpart, *puella*, as well: *puella* sexual *OLD* s.v. 3a; *puer* sexual *OLD* s.v. 3a. For *puer* or *puella* as a sexual partner or a sexual object, see e.g. Parker 1997, 49–50; Richlin 1983, 35–56; 1993; Walters 1993, 29; 1997, 31; Williams 2010, 19, 83.

[46] See Walters 1997, 31 and Williams 2010, 83 for further discussion.

[47] For women and boys as interchangeable, see e.g. Halperin 1990, 33–35. See Richlin 1983, 32–56, for a discussion of the similarities and differences between the erotic ideal of women and *pueri* in ancient erotic literature.

[48] For the notion of penetration and "penetrability" in a broader sense, see Fredrick 2002 and Walters 1998. See Vout 2007, 19–20, *passim*, for the notion that "power is penetration".

[49] Williams 2010, 31–32. See Skinner 1997, 5 on the "dominance-submission grid of Roman sexuality". See e.g. Sen. *Ep*. 47.7 where the phrase "*in cubiculo vir, in convivio puer est*" ("in the bedroom he is a man, at the banquet he is a boy") expresses how the slave plays the penetrating role in a sexual act between master and slave, see Edwards 2019, 185 and Hagelin 2020, 130–131 for further discussion.

ally, had consequences for his masculine position. Activity and control were intricately linked to the ideology of masculinity in the Late Republic and Early Empire society, and this was closely connected to the male body, drawing on the binary pairs listed above. For a Roman man it was essential to be able to guard his bodily integrity and to be in control of his body. For that reason, gladiators could be perceived as unmanly in the same way as prostitutes and actors, since these groups were seen to have given up control of their own bodies, and given it to others to be used for pleasure.[50] It was also important that a man's body was healthy and strong, since a weak and soft body made a man physically and mentally effeminized. Performing as an orator was a way for a Roman élite man to enact masculinity and it was essential that his voice was manly and strong. Thus, he must train his body and his voice, as is expressed by Quintilian in *Inst*. 11.3.19 where he recommends that the orator maintain physical strength, "*firmitas corporis*", for fear that "the voice be thinned out to the frailty of a eunuch, woman or sick person" ("*ne ad spadonum et mulierum et aegrorum exilitatem vox nostra tenuetur*")*.*[51] The voice thus became a means of defining masculinity, since the strong male voice of the orator was perceived as the opposite of the weak and soft voice of the effeminate actor.[52]

Additionally, the discourse of the strong and healthy body was essential for the Roman notion that a man's body mirrors his virtues.[53] Slavery had mental as well as physical consequences, as it made a person morally degenerate and physically stained, according to Roman common opinion.[54] This degradation of the body as well as the mind had consequences for slaves' and freedmen's ability to comply with the Roman hegemonic masculinity and slavery can in fact be seen as an emasculation. The slave was forced into a prolonged childhood,[55] in that he was subordinate to his master, he did not have the right over his own body, he could not engage in a marriage that was legally valid, and his children were illegitimate due to the illegitimacy of the marriage.[56] What is more, he was seen as a sexually available *puer*, a passive and subordinate sexual role, comparable to that of a woman. In fact, the slave could be perceived as an instrument, owned and used by the master, as expressed in Roman law.[57] The slave was thus deprived of his masculinity, as he was seen as a sexual object and was not able to take up the responsibilities of an adult man.[58]

When the slave had gained his freedom, these attributes of responsibility were available to him as he was given the right over his own body and could contract a legal marriage. Nevertheless, the manumitted slave did not become a *vir*, instead, the noun *homo* was used to define the freedman, a word that had lower connotations. Even though a freedman was free in a legal sense, he can be described as still morally unfree, since he was not fully independent. He was supposed to need help and guidance from his former master, his *patronus*, and he was in many ways dependent on his former master. The freed slave was often obliged to do work, *operae*, for his *patronus*, he had a kind of moral duty towards him, *officium*, and he ought to show him dutiful respect, *obsequium*.[59] This dependence was of crucial importance for freedmen's inability to embody hegemonic masculinity, as it can be seen as an emasculation. The subordinate masculine position of the freedman is also expressed in the use of *homo* and the freedman's inability to show *virtus*, as will be discussed below.

Cicero's letters of recommendation

Having outlined the construction of hegemonic masculinity and of other, subordinate, masculinities in Roman society, I will now examine some letters of recommendation for freedmen as well as freeborn men of higher status written by Cicero and Pliny the Younger. The wording in these letters can be analysed as descriptions of masculine positions in the context of recommendation letters. I will start the investigation of Cicero's letters by returning to the text cited in the beginning of this article, Cic. *Att*. 7.4.1:

[50] Gladiators as unmanly: Juv. 2.143–5; Sen. *Q Nat.* 7.31.3. Cf. Juv. 6.110 where gladiators are portrayed as pretty boys loved by women, *Hyacintii*, i.e. *pueri*, see further Vout 2007, 94. Edwards 1997; Stewart 2016, 49; Walters 1998, 364; Williams 2010, 154–155. Walters 1998 argues that the (male) spectator could be seen as a penetrator. Cf. Bartsch 2006, 152–164, who discusses the "penetrative viewing" and the cultural effeminization of the actor and of the body on display. See Edwards 1997 on the unmanliness of actors and prostitutes.

[51] Corbeill's translation in Corbeill 1997, 125 n. 36. Cf. Quint. *Inst*. 11.3.23–25. For voice training and gender constructions, see Gleason 1995, 82–102.

[52] Connolly 1998; Gleason 1995, 103–130; Gunderson 2000, 81–82, 133.

[53] As claimed by Gunderson, the male body was seen as a public object, which must always represent "the virtue of the character who bears it", Gunderson 2000, 61 (quotation), 70.

[54] See further Mouritsen 2011, 10–35 on the *macula servitutis* (the "stain of slavery"). See Vermote 2016 for a thorough discussion and rejection of the concept of the *macula servitutis*.

[55] For a thorough discussion of the similarities between slaves and boys, see further Hagelin 2020.

[56] *Dig.* 38.8.1.2, 38.10.10.5; *Inst. Iust.* 3.6.10.

[57] Gai. *Inst*. 1.52, 2.87. See Bradley 1984 and Watson 1987 for further discussion.

[58] This can be compared with modern slave societies, where the slave was often deprived of paternal and familial authority, treated as a child, and referred to as "boy". According to Hall, this infantilization can be seen as a way of "symbolically castrating" the black man, since it deprives him of his masculinity, Hall 2013, 252.

[59] For Roman legal references and discussion of the concepts, see e.g. Duff 1928, 36–49; Treggiari 1969, 68–81. For a discussion of the consequences these obligations had for freedmen's independence, see Mouritsen 2011, 51–58.

> *Dionysium flagrantem desiderio tui misi ad te, nec mehercule aequo animo, sed fuit concedendum. Quem quidem cognovi cum doctum, quod mihi iam ante erat notum, tum sanctum, plenum offici, studiosum etiam meae laudis, frugi hominem, ac, ne libertinum laudare videar, plane virum bonum.*
>
> I am sending you Dionysius, who is on fire with impatience to see you; reluctantly I must say, but I had to agree. I have found him not only a good scholar, which I already knew, but upright, serviceable, zealous moreover for my good name, an honest fellow, and in case that sounds too much like commending a freedman, a good man.[60]

This is the beginning of a letter that Cicero sent to his friend Atticus, probably on 13 December 50 BC.[61] Cicero is here describing Atticus' freedman Dionysius, who had worked as a teacher of Cicero's son and was highly esteemed by Cicero at the time, as can be seen in the fact that he calls the freedman "a good man", *vir bonus*. Cicero wants to emphasize how much he appreciates Dionysius, and by using the expression *vir bonus* he goes beyond the standard vocabulary when commending freedmen.

When Cicero states that he does not want his praise to sound as if he is "commending a freedman", "*ne libertinum laudare videar*", this implies that the conventional way of praising a freedman was to make use of the expression *homo frugi*. As shown in the study of Santoro L'Hoir, Cicero often uses the noun *homo* to indicate a low standing, e.g. *servi homines*[62] and *libertini homines*.[63] In these occurrences, the noun is not necessarily negatively connoted, it is simply seen as suitable for men of lower rank.[64] These men are clearly not able to comply with Roman hegemonic masculinity. Thus, *homo* is often applied by Cicero when commending freedmen, as seen in *Fam*. 13.23.1, describing the freedman L. Cossinius Anchialus as "*homo et patrono et patroni necessariis, quo in numero ego sum, probatissimus*", "a man very highly thought of by his patron, and his patron's friends, of whom I am one"[65] and in *Fam*. 3.1.1 describing the freedman Phania as "*homo non modo prudens, verum etiam* (*quod iuvet*) *curiosus*", "a sagacious man, and not only that, but also (so far as to be pleasing) inquisitive".[66] Another freedman, T. Ampius Menander is described as "a worthy, modest person" of whom Cicero has "an excellent opinion": "*T. Ampium Menandrum, hominem frugi et modestum et patrono et nobis vehementer probatum*".[67] Thus in this letter, Cicero is not afraid to use *homo frugi*, an expression "that sounds like commending a freedman" to use his words in *Att*. 7.4.1.

The word *frugi* is the dative singular of the noun *frux*, literally "fruit", which, in a translated and metonymic sense, means morality, honesty, sobriety, or virtue.[68] The predicative dative *frugi* is used as an indeclinable adjective meaning *frugalis*, *continens*, *probus*.[69] It is common in reference to slaves[70] and when it is applied to persons, especially slaves, it means "having merit or worth, honest, deserving, well-conducted, sober, thrifty".[71] It is often found in connection with adjectives describing good qualities, e.g. *bonus* (good), *diligens* (careful), *integer* (honourable), *probus* (able).[72] In Cicero, *frugi* is often used of slaves and freedmen and it is sometimes used in connection with foreigners. It can also be applied to freeborn citizens, but it is never used for men of senatorial status.[73] *Frugi* thus appears to be connected to men of subordinate status, who cannot comply with Roman hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the words *homo* and *frugi* carry a network of associations that undercut the ideals of Roman hegemonic masculinity. As a result, the combination of the words *homo* and *frugi* appears suitable for a man who cannot embody the masculine ideal of the Roman élite.

As discussed above, Roman hegemonic masculinity was embodied by the *vir bonus*, a high-status man with power and authority. Consequently, Cicero can display his very high esteem of Dionysius by calling him a *vir bonus*, as freedmen were not usually referred to by this phrase.[74] To use Thomas Kinsey's words, Cicero uses *vir* "to attribute excellence in character especially to men of high rank".[75] Thus, by calling the freedman Dionysius a *vir bonus*, Cicero appears to be giving him a possibility of complying with the hegemonic masculine ideal, a position that was normally unreachable for a freedman. In addition, in a letter that was written a few days later, Cicero's friend Atticus also refers to Dionysius as a *vir optimus*, but by then Cicero had begun to doubt the freedman's excellence, al-

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[60] Cic. *Att*. 7.4.1. Transl. Shackleton Bailey 1999, modified. My translation: "good man". Shackleton Bailey: "a really fine man".
[61] According to Shackleton Bailey 1999, 202–203.
[62] Slaves, e.g. Cic. *Verr*. 3.91, 5.23.
[63] Freedmen, e.g. Cic. *Verr.* 127; Cic. *Cat.* 3.14, 4.16.
[64] Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 16–17.
[65] Transl. Williams 1965.
[66] My translation, modelled on Williams 1965.
[67] Cic. *Fam*. 13.70, transl. Bradley 1994, 78.
[68] *OLD* s.v. *frux* 5, 741.
[69] *TLL* s.v. *frux*, 1457, 4–5.
[70] In *Forcellini* it is said that "*servum enim frugi dicebant, tanquam sobrium, utilem et necessarium, et qui rem domini diligenter curaret*", *Forcellini Lex.* s.v. *frugi* 2, 150.
[71] *OLD* s.v. *frugi* 1, 739.
[72] *TLL* s.v. *frux*, 1458, 52–69. Hagelin 2010, 131–132.
[73] Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 17.
[74] In a political speech, Cic. *Verr*. 2.1.123, a freedman is counted among "*viros bonos et honestos*", but this is exceptional, and as it is not a letter of recommendation it cannot be compared to the use in the letters. In Sen. *Consolatio ad Polybium* 9.1, the imperial freedman addressee Polybius is called *vir bonus*, but this can be seen as a very special case due to the motives and circumstances under which Seneca wrote the consolation.
[75] Kinsey 1971, 114.

though he still calls him *vir bonus* in this letter. The first part of the letter reads:

> *'Dionysius, vir optimus, ut mihi quoque est perspectus, et doctissimus tuique amantissimus, Romam venit xv Kal. Ian. et litteras a te mihi reddidit.' Tot enim verba sunt de Dionysio in epistula tua; illud, putato, non adscribis, 'et tibi gratias egit'. Atqui certe ille agere debuit et, si esset factum, quae tua est humanitas, adscripsisses. Mihi autem nulla de eo 'palinodia' datur propter superioris epistulae testimonium. Sit igitur sane bonus vir; hoc enim ipsum bene fecit, quod mihi sui cognoscendi penitus etiam istam facultatem dedit.*
>
> 'The excellent Dionysius, as I also know him to be, a fine scholar too with a warm affection for you, arrived in Rome on 16 December and gave me a letter from you'. That, no more and no less, is what you write about Dionysius in your letter. You don't add, let us say, 'and he expressed his gratitude to you.' And yet he certainly ought to have done so, and if he had it would have been unlike your kindly self not to have added it. However, I can't recant about him after the testimonial in my earlier letter. Agreed then that he is a good man. Indeed, I actually feel beholden to him for giving me this insight among others into his character.[76]

When Dionysius finally fell out of Cicero's favour, it is telling that the freedman is reduced to the status of *homo*, expressed as *homo ingratus*, "an ingrate man", in *Att*. 8.10.[77] It is clear that the freedman no longer deserves the praise expressed as *vir bonus* and by using the noun *homo*, Cicero deprives him of his apparent—but fictitious– hegemonic masculine position. In fact, also in *Fam*. 7.4.1 this position was unreachable for the freedman as the expression *vir bonus* was combined with the words *homo frugi*, articulating a subordinate masculine position.

Having shown that the expression *vir bonus* can be used as a way to praise a freedman, I will now continue the investigation by making comparisons between letters of recommendation for freedmen and freeborn men of high status, as a way to discuss if there were certain virtues, qualities, and ideals that were specific to freedmen.

A thorough study seems to indicate that many virtues and qualities were used for both freedmen and freeborn men with a high standing.[78] As seen in *Att*. 7.7.1, cited above, Cicero applies the virtue *humanitas* (kindness, refinement) to his friend Atticus ("*in quae tua est humanitas*") and in *Fam*. 7.5.2 *humanitas* is applied to Julius Caesar. This virtue was often applied to freedmen as seen in e.g. *Att*. 15.1.1.[79] *Humanitas* is a virtue that was often ascribed to Cicero's freedman Tiro, as expressed in *Fam*. 16.5.1–2, 16.11.1, 16.14.2, 16.16.2, 16.21.1. The same tendencies can be seen in e.g. *Fam*. 13.16, a letter to Julius Caesar, where Cicero praises the freedman Apollonius for his *prudentia* (sagacity); a virtue that is applied also to Julius Caesar in the same letter.[80]

Let us now explore this further by making a close comparison between a letter of recommendation for a freeborn man of high standing and a letter of recommendation for a freedman. In *Fam*. 13.28.2a, Cicero writes about L. Mescinius, who had been his *quaestor* when he held the consulship in 63 BC. In a part of this letter, he speaks of Mescinius thus:

> *Quod quidem hoc vehementius laetor, quod ex ipso Mescinio te video magnam capturum voluptatem. Est enim in eo cum **virtus** et **probitas** et summum **officium** summaque **observantia**, tum **studia** illa nostra, quibus antea delectabamur, nunc etiam vivimus.*
>
> And I rejoice at this all the more heartily because I foresee that you will get a great deal of enjoyment out of Mescinius himself; you will find in him a man of **virtue (manliness)** and **integrity**, most **willing to serve you** and most **respectful**, and at the same time devoted to those **literary pursuits** which were formerly my amusement, but are now my very life.[81]

This letter can be compared with the letter *Fam*. 13.21.2, in which Cicero recommends another man's freedman and *procurator*,[82] C. Avianius Hammonius, to Servius Sulpicius Rufus, a noble man. Part of the letter reads:

> *Nam cum propterea mihi est **probatus**, quod est in patronum suum **officio** et **fide** singulari, tum etiam in me ipsum magna **officia** contulit mihique molestissimis temporibus ita fideliter benevoleque praesto fuit, ut si a me manumissus esset.*
>
> For not only **has he won my approval** by his remarkable **sense of duty** and **loyalty** to his patron, but he has also conferred great **obligations** upon myself, and in the days of my greatest trouble he stood by me as faithfully and affectionately as though it were I who had manumitted him.[83]

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[76] Cic. *Att*. 7.7.1. Transl. Shackleton Bailey 1999, modified. My translation: "good man". Shackleton Bailey: "a very fine fellow".
[77] The expression occurs also in Cic. *Att*. 8.4.1, 9.12.2.
[78] Cf. Blänsdorf 2001; Vermote 2016.
[79] Cf. *Fam*. 16.15.2 where the freedman Aegypta is "*nec inhumanus*", "not without refinement".
[80] Cf. e.g. *Fam*. 3.1.1 where Cicero describes the freedman Phania as "*homo non modo prudens*", "not only a sagacious man".
[81] Cic. *Fam*. 13.28.2a. Transl. Williams 1965.
[82] In *Dig*. 3.3.1 *pr*., *procurator* is defined thus: "*Procurator est qui aliena negotia mandatu domini administrat*", "A procurator is one who transacts the business of another on a mandate from his principal", transl. Bradley 1994, 80.
[83] Cic. *Fam*. 13.21.2. Transl. Williams 1965.

The wording in these letters is similar: the senator Mescinius and the freedman Hammonius are both praised for showing *officium* (duty) that is, they are "willing to serve", and the element *probitas*/*probatus* occurs in both letters.[84] *Probatus* is often applied to freedmen in the recommendation letters of Cicero and seems to be especially connected to this group.[85] However, it is also found in connection with freeborn citizens, as expressed in *Fam*. 3.6.5 where "*mihi probatus*" is used of the *praefectus evocatorum* D. Antonius.

Probitas occurs with freeborn men, even equestrians, but is applied to freedmen as well. Many freedmen are described as *probi* in Cicero's letters, e.g. the freedman Tiro is described as *probus* in *Att*. 7.2.3 and in *Fam*. 13.46 he describes the freedman Zoilus as a "*homo probus*". But the epithet can be used for freeborn as well, as seen in *Fam.* 7.5, where *probus* is applied to the equestrian C. Trebatius Testa.

As one might expect, Cicero's recommendation letters have been discussed by many other scholars.[86] As previously mentioned, scholars such as Mouritsen, Rose MacLean, and Georges Fabre have argued for a certain set of virtues connected to freedmen, such as *modestia* (modesty) and the adjective *probus* (able, honest).[87] However, the conclusions of Jürgen Blänsdorf after studying the letters of Cicero are that there are no differences between epithets used for freedmen and freeborn citizens. According to Blänsdorf, in his letters of recommendation Cicero uses much the same Roman cardinal virtues for freedmen as he does when recommending young (freeborn) friends, citing adjectives such as *probus*, *prudens*, *fortis*, *fidelis*, *doctus*, *humanus*, *benevolus*. Not even the virtues *observantia* and *modestia* can be seen as "*standestypische Freigelassenentugenden*", and he thus rejects the notion of a specific vocabulary for the praise of freedmen.[88] I agree with this conclusion to a certain extent, as many virtues such as *prudentia*, *probitas*, and *humanitas* are applied to freeborn men as well as freedmen in the letters of Cicero.

In Keith Bradley's opinion, when discussing the letters *Fam*. 13.28.2a and 13.21.2, the language of recommendation that Cicero uses for the freedman Hammonius is essentially the same as that used of the senator Mescinius.[89] Richard Saller is thinking along the same lines, when he sees the epithets Cicero uses in his letters of recommendation as part of "a common language of letters of patronage", where "the same virtues seem to be cited irrespective of the office, honour or privilege requested". This language forms part of a Republican tradition of recommendations, which is followed by later authors.[90] I do not agree with Bradley's contention that the language is "essentially the same" in Cicero *Fam*. 13.28.2a and 13.21.2, as I would rather argue that there are two important differences in wording. The senator is praised for his *virtus*, his male courage, or even manliness. This quality is not mentioned for Hammonius, and *virtus* does not appear in any letter of recommendation for a freedman. The virtue *virtus* was closely connected to the noun *vir* and *virtus* seems to be a virtue that could not be associated with freedmen and slaves, and it was rarely used for women.[91]

Male courage, expressed as *virtus* in Latin and *andreia* in Greek, was central in the construction of masculinity in the ancient world.[92] *Virtus* was understood to derive from the noun *vir*, as Cicero states in Cic. *Tusc*. 2.43:

> *Appellata est enim ex viro virtus; viri autem propria maxime est fortitudo, cuius munera duo sunt maxima mortis dolorisque contemptio. Utendum est igitur his, si virtutis compotes vel potius si viri volumus esse, quoniam a viris virtus nomen est mutuata.*
>
> For the word *virtus* is derived from *vir*; indeed, the typical quality of men is fortitude, to which belong the two main duties: contempt of death and of physical pain. These therefore we must display, if we wish to be thought to possess *virtus*, or rather, since the word *virtus* is borrowed from *vir*, if we wish to be men.[93]

The original meaning of *virtus* was male courage, or manliness, but the word had certain moral connotations as well. The concept was broadened over time and was given a more ethical significance due to the influence of the Greek concept of *areté*. Both the martial and ethical meanings of *virtus* were regular in the Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome.[94]

Virtus was often used in contexts where a person was expected to display aggressive physical strength and show courage. As shown in the words of Cicero cited above, it represented "contempt of death and of physical pain", and the battlefield was therefore the ultimate place to show *virtus*.[95] Men who did not show or struggle for *virtus* were not seen

[84] See Hellegouarc'h 1963, 285–286 (*probitas*), 494–495 (*probus*).
[85] E.g. Cic. *Fam*. 13.23, 13.70; Cic. *Clu*. 52; Cic. *Flac*. 89. Deniaux 1993, 181; Fabre 1981, 229.
[86] See e.g. Hutchinson 1998 for a general discussion of Cicero's letters.
[87] Fabre 1981, 232–242; MacLean 2018, 35–72; Mouritsen 2011, 61–65.
[88] Blänsdorf 2001, 452. This is also the conclusion of Vermote 2016, 135–136.
[89] Bradley 1994, 78.
[90] Saller 1982, 108 (citation)–111.
[91] For *virtus* and women see e.g. Edwards 2007, 179–206 and Hemelrijk 2004. Hemelrijk discusses the *Laudatio Turia*, where "Turia" is praised for her *virtus*. See Barrow 2018, 138–152, for *virtus* in the context of female gladiators.
[92] Foxhall 2013, 84–88; McDonnell 2006.
[93] Transl. Hemelrijk 2004, 188.
[94] McDonnell 2006, 1–141, 385–386; 2003.
[95] Hagelin 2019, 193.

as *viri* and, according to Hellegouarc'h, it was the prominent characteristic of the Roman male élite.[96] *Virtus* can therefore be perceived as a gendered quality, distinctly gendered as masculine.[97] Since *virtus* was closely connected to the noun *vir*, it was seldom used for women, freedmen, or slaves in literary sources from the Late Republic and Early Empire.[98] When women showed *virtus* in a "manly sense", they can be seen as women who "rise above their sex", and are thus women "who can be placed among great men", as Seneca the Younger states in his consolation to his mother Helvia.[99]

In the early comedies, *virtus* sometimes appears in connection with slaves to create a comical effect, especially when it was used in a military context, as the use of armed slaves in war was very rare and was considered inappropriate.[100] This can be seen in e.g. Plautus' *Epidicus* 381, where the homonymous slave is depicted as a returning, triumphant general, possessing *virtus*.[101] As discussed in the introduction, male slaves were not perceived as "real" men, but were seen as boys, *pueri*, who were subordinate to their masters. The military connotations of *virtus*, combined with the slave's subordinate position and lack of independence made it difficult for him to possess *virtus*.[102]

Even though freedmen were not completely debarred from the military sphere, they normally did not serve in the legions and freedmen were mostly used in ways that kept them away from direct combat, such as rowers in the fleet or for garrison duties.[103] Military honours were not seen as appropriate for freedmen, possibly due to their status as ex-slaves.[104] This exclusion from active military service had implications for freedmen's ability to comply with the martial aspects of *virtus*. What is more, in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome *virtus* was a political and public virtue, very much focused on action in the public sphere.[105] As I have argued elsewhere, the public character of *virtus* made it unreachable for freedmen, who, according the normative discourse of the Roman élite, ought not to have an influential position or power in public affairs.[106] *Virtus* was closely connected to action, dignity, and independence and this made it suitable for the *vir bonus*, but unfitting for the common and private *homo*, a freedman, or a woman, who were associated with the private sphere and who enjoyed a subordinate position.

Instead of *virtus*, the freedman in Cic. *Fam*. 13.21.2 is praised for his *fides*, his fidelity. *Fides* has often been seen as the key virtue for freedmen.[107] According to Mouritsen, this is shown in Cicero's brother Quintus' praise of Tiro (Cic. *Fam*. 16.16.2 and *Att*. 9.17.2), where the freedman's *fidelitas* is considered more important than his other qualities, that is his "*litteris, sermonibus, humanitate*", "his literary and conversational powers, and his refinement", in Mouritsen's opinion.[108] However, *fides* is sometimes applied to freeborn men of higher status.[109] In fact, in Cicero's letters of recommendation it appears also in connection with freeborn officials.[110] When studying Cicero's letters of recommendation focusing on Roman officials in the provinces, Hannah Cotton argues that there are "attributes necessary for the governor's *existimatio*, or *dignitas*", and she lists *iustitia*, *fides*, *ius*, *honestum*, and *rectum* as "typical terms".[111] *Fides* is to be understood as friendship in this context, and may therefore not be seen a direct equivalent of the *fides* of a slave or freedman. Still, I would argue that *fides* cannot be seen as a virtue that was exclusive to freedmen, as it was used for élite men as well, in a similar context. Nonetheless, the use of *virtus* for the senator and *fides* for the freedman in these letters emphasizes the gendered distinction between them.

Although these letters show some differences concerning the virtues commended, I agree with Bradley when he argues that it is notable that "Cicero can speak so positively" of freedmen and that Cicero seems to assume that his addressees, who were men of higher status, would not have been disturbed

[96] Hellegouarc'h 1963, 244–245; Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 47–76.
[97] Hemelrijk 2004, 188; Williams 2010, 145.
[98] Fabre 1981, 262; Hemelrijk 2004; McDonnell 2006, 159–161; Mouritsen 2011, 62; cf. Deniaux 1993, 181. See Deslauriers 2003, 187–211 on slaves and *andreia* in Aristotle.
[99] Sen. *Helv*. 16.5: "*... si modo illas intueri voles feminas, quas conspecta virtus inter magnos viros posuit*". See also Hemelrijk 2004, 191; Williams 2010, 145–146.
[100] An exception was the *voloni*, slaves who were fielded in the Second Punic War in exchange for freedom, according to Livy 22.57.11–12, 23.35.6–9, 24.14.3–10, 24.15–16. A much later example of slaves enlisted in the army is found during the reign of Honorius, according to a law issued in AD 406, *Cod. Theod*. 7.13.16. I am indebted to Dr Hans Lejdegård for this reference.
[101] For a thorough discussion, see McDonnell 2006, 16–33. According to McDonnell, "the comic use of military imagery by or of a slave is a hallmark of Plautine style", McDonnell 2006, 18.
[102] Hagelin 2019, 193–194; McDonnell 2006, 159.
[103] Mouritsen 2011, 71–72; Treggiari 1969, 67–68.
[104] An exception is found in Val. Max. 8.14.5 where a freedman is praised for his actions in war. However, the general Metellus Scipio refuses to give the military decoration of a golden armband to the valiant cavalryman because he was a former slave, and, after humiliating the man in public, gives him an armband of silver. McDonnell 2006, 160.
[105] Hellegouarc'h 1963, 244–245; McDonnell 2006, 172.
[106] Cf. Tac. *Agr*. 19.2. See Hagelin 2019 for further discussion. However, in the provinces and cities in Italy the freedmen could earn a position in the community élite as *Augustales*, see e.g. D'Arms 1981; Meiggs 1960.
[107] Mouritsen 2011, 61–65. See Fabre 1981, 226–242 and MacLean 2018, 37–54 for a thorough discussion on *fides* as well as other ideals for freedmen.
[108] Mouritsen 2011, 61.
[109] For the concept of *fides*, see Hellegouarc'h 1963, 23–35 (*fides*), 35–36 (*fidus*/*fidelis*), 37–38 (*fidelitas*).
[110] See e.g. Deniaux 1993, 180 for references.
[111] Cotton 1986, 448.

by the fact that he so warmly recommended freedmen.[112] As expressed by Saller, there was a notion of guilt and virtue by association in Roman society and "the very fact that a man possessed a recommendation associated him with the worth of its author". This feasibly worked the other way around too, that is, the behaviour of the recommended reflected upon the person who recommended him/her.[113] Bradley points out that the letter discussed above (Cic. *Fam*. 13.21) was not an isolated case, and he sees these letters as expressions of patronage. The freedmen recommended by Cicero were engaged in business matters or commerce, that is, they were acting in the work sphere, on behalf of their patron. Freedmen were of crucial importance for the aristocrats as they functioned as agents and managers and could be valuable in building commercial networks for their patrons.[114] Thus, it is not surprising that Cicero speaks positively of his own and his friends' freedmen. It is also important to remember that the letters are very much dependent on the nature of the genre, and thus can be seen as expressions of what was expected and acceptable to write in this rhetorical literary context.

To conclude, in the recommendation letters of Cicero there appears to be no virtues and qualities, such as *humanitas*, *officium*, or *probitas*, that were reserved or exclusive to freedmen. Rather, I would like to argue that in the letters of Cicero, the differences between freedmen and freeborn men of a high standing are not as visible as has been stated by some scholars. Many virtues and epithets were, in fact, common for both groups and this may suggest that, to a certain extent, a similar masculine ideal was applied to both groups. Nonetheless, I cannot agree with Saller's and Bradley's assertion that the language is "essentially the same". The recommendation letters for freedmen show some important omissions and evidence for a particular expression connected to freedmen, which have implications for freedmen's possibility to embody Roman hegemonic masculinity. The crucial parameters in this respect are the words *vir* and *virtus*, as they played a key role in the construction of Roman masculinities and were of major importance for the freedman's masculine position due to intersections of gender and status. Thus, the lack of *virtus* was of central importance for freedmen's inability to embody hegemonic masculinity.

To follow up on these tentative conclusions, I will now turn to the letters of recommendation by Pliny the Younger to find out if they show evidence for virtues, qualities, and ideals that were specific or exclusive to freedmen. In addition, I will compare them with the letters of Cicero, to determine whether any differences may be traced between the two authors as regards freedman ideals and masculinity.

Pliny's letters of recommendation

The letters that are studied in this section derive from the tenth book of Pliny the Younger's letters, where the correspondence between Pliny and the emperor Trajan is collected.[115] In a letter of recommendation written by Pliny to the emperor Trajan (*Ep.* 10.85), we can see how an imperial freedman procurator was described, what qualities were ascribed to him, and what behaviour was expected. The entire letter reads:

> *C. Plinius Traiano Imperatori. Maximum libertum et procuratorem tuum, domine, per omne tempus, quo fuimus una,* ***probum et industrium et diligentem*** *ac sicut rei tuae amantissimum ita disciplinae tenacissimum expertus, libenter apud te testimonio prosequor, ea fide quam tibi debeo.*
>
> C. Plinius to Traianus Imperator. Having found by experience, sir, that your freedman and procurator Maximus, during the whole period we have been together, is **upright, hardworking and conscientious**, and as completely devoted to your interests as he is faithful in observing your discipline, I am very pleased to send him on his way with my recommendation to you, in that good faith which I owe to you.[116]

In this letter, the freedman and procurator Maximus is described as *probus*, *industrius*, and *diligens*. That is, upright or honest, active or hardworking, and careful or conscientious. These adjectives can be compared with the words used in the following letter, *Ep*. 10.86a, where Pliny recommends an equestrian, Gavius Bassus, who is also an officeholder of the emperor:

> *Gavium Bassum, domine, praefectum orae Ponticae* ***integrum probum industrium*** *atque inter ista reverentissimum mei expertus, voto pariter et suffragio prosequor, ea fide quam tibi debeo.*

[112] Bradley 1994, 78 (citation)–80.
[113] Saller 1982, 109 (including quote). Cf. Lendon 1997, 48; Roda 1986.
[114] Bradley 1994, 78–80; Verboven 2012. Verboven sees freedmen as an important part of their patron's trust network and social capital, Verboven 2012, 98.
[115] As I have argued elsewhere, a close examination of these letters suggests that freedmen and equestrian officials worked together without any discontent on either part. The freedmen appear as competent and respected officials and it seems that the other officials did not question the freedmen's authority in the matters discussed in the letters, Hagelin 2010, 100–109.
[116] Plin. *Ep*. 10.85. Transl. Williams 1990.

> Having found by experience, sir, that Gavius Bassus the prefect of the Pontic shore is **honourable, upright, hard-working**, and besides this most respectful towards myself, I send him on his way with my prayers as well as my support, in that good faith which I owe to you.[117]

Gavius Bassus is described as *integer*, *probus*, and *industrius*, and so is Rosianus Geminus, a former quaestor (Plin. *Ep*. 10.26), using the nouns instead of the adjectives: "*Rosianum Geminum* […] ***integritatem*** *eius* ***et probitatem et industriam*** […]"

Thus, all three officeholders are described as *probus* and *industrius*, whereas the freedman procurator Maximus is described as *diligens*, careful, instead of *integer*, honourable. The wording in the letter of recommendation of the freedman procurator Maximus and in the letters for the other officials with higher status is strikingly similar. According to Caillan Davenport, "Pliny used virtually identical terms to describe the eques Gavius Bassus", and he sees these two letters as "standard references".[118]

However, other scholars have interpreted these letters differently.[119] Adrian Nicholas Sherwin-White, in his commentary to Pliny's letters, sees differences between the letters 10.85 and 10.86a and argues that Trajan "can read between the lines", when Pliny uses the adjective *integer* to describe the freeborn officials Gavius Bassus and Rosianus Geminus, but omits it for Maximus, stating "which quality ep.[10.]27 suggests that he lacked".[120] The interpretations of Henriette Pavis d'Escurac and Antonio Gonzalès follow this line of thought. According to Pavis d'Escurac, Pliny "*introduit certain nuances*" in the letter for Maximus, and he "*se content de certifier que Maximus* […] *s'était montré* probus*,* industrius *et* diligens". Gavius Bassus, on the other hand, in her opinion, is expressly recommended for advancement ("*suffragio prosequor*"). Gonzalès cites Pavis d'Escurac in his discussion on the recommendation of Maximus and argues that Pliny uses "*les vertus cardinales*" for a good slave and freedman when recommending Maximus.[121] Saller, however, does not agree with Sherwin-White's contention that Trajan "can read between the lines" in the letter for Maximus, arguing that this would imply that the emperor had to read every letter of recommendation and compare them to reveal the "true meaning" of each letter, based on the omission of a certain epithet. According to Saller, it is not possible to draw any conclusions at all regarding merits of the person recommended in these letters and, in this sense, the recommendations cannot be seen as "meaningful reports".[122]

Thus, some of these scholars contend that it is possible to draw conclusions about the social status and Pliny's appreciation of the freedman procurator Maximus based on the use of epithets in these letters, building on the contention that Maximus is described with an adjective that has lower connotations and is more fitting for freedmen and slaves than freeborn men with a higher status. Saller, on the other hand, claims that it is not possible to say anything at all due to the paucity of information in these letters; he sees the used adjectives as "banal" and argues that no critical evaluation of performance has been undertaken.[123] In Saller's opinion, the language of recommendation used in Pliny's letters stems from Cicero's recommendations, being part of a Republican tradition of recommendations, which is also used by later authors, e.g. Fronto. As mentioned, his conclusion is that in letters of recommendation "the same virtues seem to be cited irrespective of the office, honour or privilege requested".[124] I will argue along a different line regarding these epithets, but before doing so, it is necessary to do a close study of the epithets used in the recommendation letters in question.

I will examine these virtues one by one, starting with the adjective *probus.* According to *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (*TLL*) the main significance of *probus* is "*qui (quod) cui videtur ita esse, ut debeat sc. fere i. q. bonus, rectus sim*",[125] meaning that things are the way they ought to be according to their specific quality. Thus, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (*OLD*) translates the adjective, when referring to persons, as "having great ability, able, clever" or, in a stricter sense, "having an upright character, righteous, honest" and, when referring to women in particular, "virtuous, modest".[126] A close reading of all of Pliny's letters shows that *probus* often occurs in reference to free and élite men and women, and so seems somewhat more closely connected to this group.[127] Nevertheless, in three passages, the adjective is used in connection to slaves and freedmen, but these are persons who enjoy a status out of the ordinary for a freedman or a slave.[128] Hence, *probus* appears to have quite high connotations in the work of Pliny and it seems to be part of the ideals for the élite.[129]

This can be compared with the use of the adjective *probus* in Cicero's letters of recommendation, where it is used in

[117] Plin. *Ep*. 10.86a. Transl. Williams 1990.
[118] Davenport 2019, 341.
[119] For a more thorough discussion on the conclusion of previous scholars, see Hagelin 2010, 115–117.
[120] Sherwin-White 1966, 681–682.
[121] Pavis d'Escurac 1992, 60; Gonzalès 2003, 76 (citation), 229–230.
[122] Saller 1982, 106–108. Cf. Williams 1990 and Gamberini 1983.
[123] Saller 1982, 106–108.
[124] Saller 1982, 108 (citation)–111. See Hagelin 2010, 110–134, for further discussion.
[125] *TLL* s.v. *probus* 1483, 48–49.
[126] *OLD* s.v. *probus*.
[127] Plin. *Ep.* 2.9.3, 10.94.1, 8.18.8.
[128] Plin. *Ep.* 5.19.2–3, 10.32.1; Plin. *Pan.* 88.2.
[129] See Hagelin 2010, 118–121.

connection with freedmen as well as freeborn men, forming part of a masculine ideal. Further, in his panegyric to Trajan, Pliny uses the adjectives "*probi et frugi*" to describe the emperor's freedmen, eulogizing the emperor's ability to treat his freedmen in "the right way" (Plin. *Pan*. 88.2).[130] As mentioned, *frugi* is often used for slaves and in Pliny, out of four occurrences, it is found twice in connection with slaves.[131] Nevertheless, in *Ep*. 2.17.26, Pliny uses *frugi* in connection to himself, when he calls himself "a modest man", "*homo frugi*". In Cicero's letters, *frugi* was often used for slaves and freedmen. It could be applied to freeborn persons, but it was never used for men of senatorial status. *Frugi* seemed to be connected to men of subordinate status, who could not comply with Roman hegemonic masculinity, as seen in the use of the expression *homo frugi* in Cicero's letters. According to Santoro L'Hoir, Pliny often uses the same gender terms as Cicero, and in the letters of Pliny, *homo* is connected to freedmen, whereas *vir* is applied to men of high birth.[132] Pliny's use of *homo frugi* for himself, a Roman senator, to express his modest needs, may indicate that the word *frugi* must not always articulate a subordinate masculine position. However, the crucial parameter in this respect is of course that Pliny is referring to himself in this passage; he may not have chosen this expression when referring to another man of senatorial status. By using the phrase *homo frugi*, Pliny is linking himself with the ideal of frugality, a virtue that was associated to self-control and played a role in the conceptualization of masculinity in the Roman gender discourse.[133]

The next adjective to be examined is *industrius* and its counterpart *industria*. *TLL* defines it as "*assiduus, diligens, sedulus, promptus, solers, laboriosus*" and *Forcellini* describes it as "*multum artis et operae ponens in rebus agendis*".[134] It can be translated as "diligent, active, zealous, assiduous" or similar.[135] This virtue occurs in every letter of recommendation in Pliny, with one exception (*Ep.* 10.86b).[136] In the letters of Pliny, this virtue is connected to freeborn men, with two exceptions, *Ep*. 10.85 (Maximus) and *Ep.* 8.6. In *Ep*. 8.6.6, the outstanding loyalty, *fides*, and *industria* of the freedman Pallas is eulogized in the decree of the senate. The virtue is never used to describe a slave or a woman in Pliny, and it seems to be connected to ambition, mostly in a good sense. In the tenth book of Pliny, it always occurs in connection with the adjective *probus* and it is plausible that both were standard epithets that ought to be included in this kind of letter.[137]

Let us now examine the third adjective describing the freedman Maximus, that is, *diligens*, the adjective that makes the recommendation of Maximus different from the recommendations of Gavius Bassus and Rosianus Geminus. The adjective *diligens* is originally the present participle of the verb *diligo* and its first significance is *amans*, *studiosus*, closely connected to the verb.[138] The more common meaning is *accuratus*, *subtilis*, *attentus*, *sedulus*, *cautus*, and *prudens*, a development from the original meaning that a person is "esteeming or loving in respect to an inanimate object".[139] *Diligens* also has a third signification, *parcus*, *frugi*, *tenax*, in a more economic sense.[140] In this citation, the second signification is probably intended and *diligens* can be translated as "careful, attentive, diligent, and scrupulous".[141] *Diligens* occurs 15 times in the work of Pliny, never referring to a woman, a common slave, or a common freedman. When it is used in the same sense as in the Maximus letter, it is always connected to a profession, e.g. *diligens tabularius* (*Ep*. 2.12.6, 8.3.2) and the epithet appears in Pliny to be closely connected to someone's work and professional skill. *Diligens* is often connected to work of quite low status, such as *tabularius* or *medicus*, but it is also used to describe the emperor Trajan (*Ep*. 6.31.14; *Pan*. 51.1, 79.5). This indicates that *diligens* was seen as a virtue that was appropriate for a man who could embody Roman hegemonic masculinity, as the Roman emperor can be perceived as a personification of the perfect male citizen.

According to the examples found in *TLL*, *diligens* has no low connotations: it is used in reference to women as well as men, and is often connected to men of a high standing such as *dux* or *imperator*, and it is once used in connection to a senator. Thus, in general, *diligens* appears to be an ideal that can be used irrespective of status and gender. I would therefore argue that the reason why Pliny chose this particular epithet for Maximus was probably not that Maximus was a freedman and consequently of lower standing than the other men commended. It is possible that Pliny wanted to highlight Maximus' diligence because it was characteristic of him.[142] But, it may also be a mere coincidence that this virtue was applied to Maximus and not to the other freeborn officials.

To conclude this analysis it is necessary to examine the epithet *integer* in order to determine whether this word is more connected to freeborn men and so is less suitable for a slave

[130] See Hagelin 2010, 81–86, 130–134, 160–164, for further discussion.
[131] Slaves: Plin. *Ep.* 1.21, 3.19.
[132] Santoro L'Hoir 1992, 158–159.
[133] Cf. Corbeill 1997. See e.g. Nelsestuen 2014, 152–157, on the modest farmer as an ideal for the Roman élite. See e.g. D'Arms 1981, 155, 169, on wealthy élite men pretending not to be rich.
[134] *TLL* s.v. *industrius*, 1276–1277; *Forcellini Lex.* s.v. *industrius* 473.
[135] *OLD* s.v. *industrius*.
[136] It is difficult to draw any conclusion from this letter, since the textual shape of it is corrupt.
[137] Cf. Hagelin 2010, 121–123.
[138] *TLL* s.v. *diligens*, 1181–1183.
[139] *TLL* s.v. *diligens*, 1181–1183; *LS* s.v. *diligens.*
[140] *TLL* s.v. *diligens* 3, 1181–1183.
[141] *OLD* s.v. *diligens* 2.
[142] Sherwin-White 1966, 683, asserts that Pliny possibly chose "the attribute appropriate to each man's duty".

or freedman. *Integer* is defined primarily as "*intactus*, *non tactus*", in *TLL*. The second sense, described in *TLL* as "*spectat ad animi naturam, mores, affectus*" is here divided into two categories, i.e. "*sub specie probitatis*" and "*sub specie simplicitatis*, *ingenuitatis*, *sinceritatis*, *fidelitatis*".[143] In *OLD* the two senses are found partly in the same category, translated as "morally unblemished, upright",[144] and this is the way it can be translated in the passages that are under discussion. In the works of Pliny, apart from *Ep*. 10.86a, the adjective *integer* is found only once in the sense intended in the letter of recommendation. Accordingly, the occurrence of the words *integritas* and *integre* has been taken into consideration, when they are used with the same meaning as the adjective. *Integritas* and *integer* are found three times in the letters of Pliny, always in connection to men of high birth. Also, in *TLL*, *integer* in a moral sense, appears to be more connected to men of a higher standing and is only once used to describe a slave. This slave, Diogenes, the slave of a certain doctor, is described as *frugi* and *integer* by Cicero (*Clu.* 47). In *TLL*, except for this occurrence, *integer* never refers to a slave, freedman, or woman in this sense.[145] Thus, the adjective appears more closely connected to men of high birth and thus to the masculine ideal of the élite, but its occurrence in Cicero shows that it was possible to use *integer* also in connection to a slave. I would therefore argue that Pliny's reason for omitting *integer* in the letter of recommendation for Maximus was probably not that it was inappropriate when describing a freedman (or slave). Its omission is most likely not connected to any difference in standing or dignity.

As can be concluded from the examination above, the epithets used in Pliny's letters of recommendation do not say much about social standing or differentiation of masculinity. All the epithets seem somewhat more connected to freeborn and high status, but not entirely so, and no clear difference appears between the epithets themselves. No epithet seems to be exclusive to freeborn men or to freedmen/slaves and there is no evidence for the existence of a distinct set of virtues for freedmen in these letters. The sample of epithets in Pliny is too small to use statistically, but it may suggest that in some contexts, a meritocratic attitude towards freedmen was possible, which did not depend on status of birth, as the same qualities were expected and appreciated in them during their work in the imperial service.[146]

The letters of Pliny and Cicero appear to show little variation concerning virtues and ideals, as the language in the letters of Pliny follows closely in the Republican tradition.[147] The letters of Pliny can be seen as official letters, or even standard letters, whereas the letters of Cicero are often private letters even when addressed to officials, where personal qualities are eulogized.[148] The letters of Pliny were written with the idea of publication in mind, while the letters of Cicero were "real" letters, some of which he later decided to publish, but the majority were published posthumously (possibly according to his wish). Yet, the letters of Cicero and Pliny show the same tendencies, namely that in this literary context, it was acceptable to describe freeborn, and even noble, men and freedmen in similar ways, regarding many virtues and qualities.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore Roman freedmen's masculinities expressed as virtues, qualities, and ideals in the recommendation letters of Cicero and Pliny the Younger. In so doing, the intention was to discuss whether there were specific freedman virtues, qualities, and ideals and what their existence or absence tells us about freedmen's masculinity and how they were positioned in relation to the masculine ideal of the Roman élite. In addition, its aim was to investigate if differences between the two authors or changes in ideals could be discerned.

Scholars such as Fabre, MacLean, and Mouritsen have argued for a certain set of virtues connected to freedmen, such as *industria* and the adjective *probus*.[149] The findings of this study suggest that there were no virtues or qualities that were specific or exclusive to freedmen and there seems to be no distinct set of freedman virtues. In the studied context, freedmen and freeborn men of high status were expected to share many of the same virtues and behaviour. This opens up for a possible meritocratic attitude towards freedmen, less dependent on status of birth, in the context of recommendation letters. The letters of Cicero and Pliny appear to show little variation regarding virtues and ideals, as the language in the letters of Pliny follows closely in the Ciceronian tradition.

However, the recommendation letters of Cicero showed an important omission as regards letters for freedmen, which had implications for the possibility that a freedman might embody Roman hegemonic masculinity. The virtue *virtus* (manly courage, manliness) did not occur in recommendations for

[143] *TLL* s.v. *integer*, 2071–2081.
[144] *OLD* s.v. *integer* 13, 935. The division of the signification is different from the one in *TLL*.
[145] *TLL* s.v. *integer*, 2074, 70–84.
[146] Cf. Hagelin 2010, 110–130.
[147] In fact, Pliny twice compares himself with Cicero, Plin. *Ep*. 3.20.10, 9.2.2–3.
[148] Although the letters may have been polished before publication. For the letters of Cicero, see further e.g. Cotton 1986; Hutchinson 1998. See e.g. White 2018 on Cicero as a model for Pliny and on the difference of their letters.
[149] Fabre 1981, 232–242; MacLean 2018, 35–72; Mouritsen 2011, 61–65.

freedmen and it was concluded that this virtue was not suitable for freedmen. *Virtus* played a crucial role in the conceptualization of masculinities in the Roman gender discourse. Its close connection to the noun *vir* was also of major importance in this respect, as *vir* was rarely used for freedmen. It was not possible for freedmen to embody the ideal of the *vir bonus*, the hegemonic masculine ideal of the Roman élite. Instead, in the letters of Cicero, the conventional way of praising a freedman was to make use of the expression *homo frugi*. The *vir bonus* ideal was not appropriate for freedmen, and the phrase was only used in special cases. This can be seen in the letters of Pliny as well, where *homo* is connected to freedmen, whereas *vir* is applied to men of high birth.

The omission of *virtus* and the use of the expression *homo frugi* instead of *vir bonus* in the recommendation letters can be perceived as a construction of masculinity connected to freedmen, that illustrates the desire to uphold status boundaries among the Roman élite and to maintain the hegemonic masculinity. According to Mouritsen, "[t]he construction of specific libertine qualities reflected the notion that they realized their potential for virtue differently from freeborn male citizens; essentially it happened through fidelity and hard work rather than valour and independent action". Mouritsen points out that there are parallels between Roman freedmen and women in this respect, but he does not elaborate further on this assertion.[150] Although I do not agree with Mouritsen as regards his contention of a distinct set of freedman virtues, I do find that "valour and independent action" are crucial parameters in this respect. Enacting hegemonic masculinity in Roman society was to exercise power and to perform in public and this was personified by the *vir bonus*. The freedman, a subordinate *homo* ideally confined to performances in the private sphere, could not comply with this ideal, according to the normative discourse of the Roman élite. In this respect, the position of women and freedmen was similar in Roman society, due to their exclusion from political offices and the restrictions that were applied to them in public life. Thus, both groups were in many ways debarred from a site where masculinity was constructed and where it could be proven and tested.

The similarity between freedmen and women illustrates the complexity of the Roman gender discourse, as it problematizes the binary opposition man/woman and shows the existence of various forms of Roman masculinity. In addition, it elucidates the social complexity of Roman society, since the social status and gender identity of freedmen could be perceived as a position somewhat "in between" groups: a distinct set of freedman virtues did not exist and it was acceptable to describe freeborn élite men and freedmen in similar ways. Nevertheless, freedmen could not comply in full with the hegemonic masculine ideal of the élite, due to intersections of gender and status.

LISA HAGELIN
Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University
Engelska parken, Humanistiskt centrum
Box 527
751 20 Uppsala, Sweden
lisa.hagelin@gender.uu.se

[150] Mouritsen 2011, 64 (including quote).

Abbreviations

Forcellini Lex. = E. Forcellini 1858–1875. *Totius Latinitatis Lexicon opera et studio Aegidii Forcellini lucubratum ... amplissime auctum atque emendatum cura et studio Vincentii De-Vit*, 6 vols., Prato.

LS = C.T. Lewis & C. Short 1975. *A Latin dictionary*, Oxford.

OLD = P.W. Glare, ed. 1982. *Oxford Latin dictionary*, Oxford.

TLL = 1900–, *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, Leipzig.

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