An (other) epitaph for Trimalchio: Sat. 30.2*

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Trimalchio’s fabulous epitaph, recited in full by Petronius’ colourful host towards the end of the Cena (Sat. 71.12), has long attracted abundant comment.1 Similarly, allusions to the underworld in much of the decoration leading to and in Trimalchio’s dining room have been the object of intense scholarly discussion of the freedman’s morbid characterization.2 In consequence, it is now accepted that epitaph and funereal allusions make for a deliberate mirage of the netherworld – so much so that ‘[...] Trimalchio’s home is in some sense to be regarded as a house of the dead’.3 As John Bodel has shown, ‘Petronius signalled his intention to portray Trimalchio’s home as an underworld earlier in the episode’.4 Examples for this include the procession from the baths to Trimalchio’s house that preceded the banquet (Sat. 28.4-5) – ‘resembling nothing so much as a Roman cortege’,5 and the wall paintings in the porticus of Trimalchio’s house which made Encolpius stop and pause, as Aeneas had done at the Temple of Apollo at Cumae (Sat. 29.1). The example of the pairing of the Cerberus-like watchdog encountered by Encolpius and friends during their escape (Sat. 72.7) and the painted dog in Trimalchio’s vestibule that frightened Encolpius upon his arrival (Sat. 29.1) makes it moreover clear that Petronius engaged in some elaborate ring composition concerning Trimalchio’s portrayal as a dead man walking. It is surprising, then, that Petronius should have failed to square the circle as regards Trimalchio’s epitaph: Sat. 71.12 appears to lack an earlier match – and this despite the fact that a visitor to a Roman tomb might well expect to be informed about the name of the deceased, and perhaps a few other details, at the moment of entering the tomb.

* Thanks to Gavin Kelly and Costas Panayotakis for comments on this and other Trimalchian adventures; and to Michael Crawford for discussion of funerary epigraphy. All mistakes are mine.

1 For a recent summary of some main contributions (in English) see V. Hope, ‘At home with the dead. Roman funeral traditions and Trimalchio’s tomb’, in J. Prag and I. Repath (edd.), Petronius. A Handbook (Oxford, 2009), 140-60. See also n. 9 below.


3 Bodel (n. 2), 239.

4 Bodel (n. 2), 240.

5 Bodel (n. 2), 243.
II.

A peculiar assemblage at the entrance to Trimalchio’s dining room features a triumphal rostrum, fasces, a lamp – and an inscription (Sat. 30.2): ‘C. Pompeio Trimalchioni, seviro Augustali, Cinnamus dispensator’ / ‘To Gaius Pompeius Trimalchio, sevir Augustalis. (From) Cinnamus, his dispensator’. With due reference to a number of real inscriptions from Pompeii, Amedeo Maiuri interpreted the inscription as a dedicatory text. More recently, Jonathan Prag argued for a honorific reading of the text. In so doing, Prag specifically argued against a funerary reading: ‘it is in the context of honorific, rather than funerary practice that the inscription set up by Trimalchio’s dispensator belongs’.

In contrast to Trimalchio’s commissioned epitaph, Sat. 30.2 lacks any reference to the death of the person concerned – such as the deceased person’s presence in the tomb (e.g. ‘HIC SITVS EST’), his or her dead body or parts thereof (e.g. ‘OSSA’), the underworld (e.g. ‘DIS MANIBVS’), the lengths of their lives (e.g. ‘VIXIT ANNOS X’), or even any mention of having set up or paid for the tomb, tombstone or sarcophagus (e.g. ‘FECIT’), let alone the actual tomb or burial space (e.g. ‘IN FRONTE PEDES X’). It lacks moreover the eulogistic element so typical of much funerary epigraphy of the republican and imperial age – beyond a brief mention of Trimalchio’s position as sevir Augustalis. But, in fact, none of these elements need be present in a funerary text. Thus, Gaius Veveius was commemorated by his daughter Veveia precisely without any reference to the death of her father – let alone an exercise in eulogy:

[V]EVEIA C F C VEVEIO

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If we are given more information than the name of the deceased, this consists often in not much more than the name of the commemorator, as in the case of Veveia, and the relationship between the commemorator and the person to be commemorated, that between daughter and father for Veveia. Beyond commemoration of family relations amongst the

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6 Neither the precise layout, the location(s) or the rendering of the inscription at the entrance to Trimalchio’s dining room is critical for my argument. For discussion of the text’s location see, e.g., G. Bagnani, ‘The House of Trimalchio’, AJPh 75 (1954), 16-39, at 29-30, and J.R.W. Prag, ‘Cave navem: Petronius, Satyricon 30.1’, CQ 56 (2006), 538-47, at 539-40. For a suggested layout of the text see Bagnani, op. cit., 31 (but note his choice of ‘SEVIRO’ in place of ‘SEVIRO’).

7 A. Maiuri, La Cena di Trimalchione di Petronio Arbitro (Naples, 1945), 157 (and 244). More recent studies have followed this approach without further analysis: see, e.g., M. G. Cavalca, I grecismi nel Satyricon di Petronio (Bologna, 2001), 64; G. G. Gamba, Petronio Arbitro e i cristiani. Ipotesi per una lettura contestuale del Satyricon (Rome, 1998), 143-144; M. S. Smith, Petronii Arbitri, Cena Trimalchionis (Oxford, 1975), 62.

8 Prag, ‘Cave navem’ (n. 6), 544.


10 CIL I.2.2534 = X.6473 (Setia): ‘To Gaius Veveius, her father, [from] Veveia, daughter of Gaius’.
free(-born), slaves, too, were known to act as commemorators for kin, friends, and even their superiors, as the following examples remind us:  

Moreover, slaves are known to commemorate their masters, as the example of Honoratus, (former) *actor* of (his then deceased master) Blossius demonstrates. Honoratus, of course, is a fairly late example; and whilst it seems to have been rare during the Principate for slaves to commemorate their masters, this nonetheless occurred both within and outwith Italy, as Richard Saller and Brent Shaw demonstrated some 25 years ago in their study of epigraphically attested (extended) family relations. There is no need to add further inscriptions here. What becomes clear from these few examples is Petronius' very careful crafting of a funerary text which, at first sight, could be overlooked as such even by scholars otherwise keen to assert allusions to death and dying in the house of Trimalchio. Yet, the inscription would occasion no surprise in us if found on the Isola Sacra or in a *columbarium* at Rome.

If we moreover replaced our predilection for reading Petronius with a preparedness to see Trimalchio – or, here, his abode – the clear visual allusion that the assemblage consisting of doorposts, entrance, inscription, etc. makes to real tombs on the *Gräberstrassen* of Roman Italy would be immediately clear, and with this the funerary function of the text. But Petronius challenges more than just our sense of sight: the choice of name of the commemorating *dispensator*, Cinnamus – the masculine form of *cinnamum*, cinnamon, recalls the spice that was used to sweeten the air during funerals. Like Carpus the carver, whose job...
was to carve meats, so Cinnamus is a Petronian ‘confusion’ of name with function, underscoring the sepulchral connotation. The inscription on the doorpost to Trimalchio’s dining room makes, then, for a good epitaph.

III.

The identification of *Sat. 30.2* as an epitaph does not exclude other readings of the text: Petronius’ choice of grammatical case for Trimalchio’s name offers maximum scope for interpretation, which cannot be incidental: Trimalchio’s name and title appear in the dative (C. Pompeio Trimalchioni seviro Augustali). The use of the dative for the name and title of the deceased is indeed common in funerary epigraphy; the dative is also used in dedicatory inscriptions, and appears moreover in honorary inscriptions (for which one would otherwise expect the use of the accusative): *Sat. 30.2* could be an honorific inscription or a dedicatory text or an epitaph. There are no good grounds to think that Petronius, having crafted our inscription so as to give it maximum interpretative scope, requires of his modern readers a definite classification. But there is good reason to recognise the funerary aspect of the text in question and its interpretative consequences – namely an early identification of Trimalchio’s abode as a tomb and Trimalchio as a dead man walking: together with the painted Cerberus’ welcome and Encolpius’ Aeneas moment briefly mentioned above, the epitaph leaves no doubt as to the nature of the banquet to be consumed and of the characters to be met. Thus, the ring composition of the *Cena*, itself long recognised by modern scholarship, is not just played out on the level of generic allusions to the underworld, but very specifically on that of an individual’s death – that of the *princeps libertinorum*.18

In sum, the epitaph imagined by the freedman at the end of the dinner party is matched by an (other) epitaph for Trimalchio located at the entrance to his dining room –

15 See *Sat. 36.5-8* for the pun on the name of the carver Carpus. For an association of cinnamon with funerals in the ancient literary sources see Plin. *HN* 12.83, and Plut. *Sull.* 38; and for a brief modern discussion of the use of cinnamon (and other spices) in funerals see D. Noy, ‘Building a Roman funeral pyre’, *Artichokes 34* (2000), 30-45, at 37-8. Naturally, Cinnamus was also the name of actual slaves, without this implying in real life a funerary or funereal connotation, for which see, e.g., the epitaph of the *dispensator* Cinnamus from Rome: *CIL* VI.9337. The same applies to Carpus as a slave name, for which see, e.g., the epitaph of Carpus (and his brother), the slave of a tax guild, again from Rome: *CIL* VI.8587. The fact that cinnamon was traded over vast distances, bought, sold and resold on the way, may in turn be an allusion to the slave status of Cinnamus: see J. I. Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire, 29 BC-AD 641* (Oxford, 1969), 153-72 for discussion of the ‘cinnamon route’.

16 The gap between honorific and funerary texts became increasingly smaller in the Principate as a result of ‘a growing degree of crossover between honorific and funerary commemoration’ in private contexts in the early Empire: Prag, ‘*Cave navem*’ (n. 6), 544.

17 For general discussion of multiple readings and viewpoints in and of the *Satyricon* see N. W. Slater, *Reading Petronius* (Baltimore and London, 1990), and V. Rimell, *Petronius and the Anatomy of Fiction* (Cambridge, 2002); and for discussion of multiple (mis)readings in a specific analytical niche see P. Habermehl, ‘Petrus und Petronius. Ein Seitenblick auf neue christliche Lesarten der *Satyricon*’, in Castagna and Lefèvre (edd.), *Studien zu Petron* (n. 2), 33-49.

indicating right from the start that the party’s host is ‘experiencing a kind of living death’.\textsuperscript{19} Whilst Trimalchio’s freedman friend Habinnas is directed at the end of what must be the most opulent dinner party of Latin literature ‘to prepare his monument “so that by your benefitium I may be able to live after death”’,\textsuperscript{20} Trimalchio’s dispensator Cinnamus had already provided that service to his freedman master so that he might live on the stage we call the \textit{Cena Trimalchionis}: to every man his own gravestone – \textit{cuique suum cippom} – and to Trimalchio, two.\textsuperscript{21}

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\textsuperscript{19} E. Courtney, \textit{A Companion to Petronius} (Oxford, 2001), 117.
\textsuperscript{20} Saller and Shaw (n. 13), 127.
\textsuperscript{21} Borrowed from \textit{CIL} P.2660 (Rome): CVIQ | VE SV[OM] | CIPO.