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Pueri delicati in the household of Pliny the Younger: slaves' strategies of resistance to sexual abuse

Pueri delicati en la casa de Plinio el Joven: estrategias de resistencia de los niños esclavos frente al abuso sexual

Gonzalo Fontana Elboj
<gonzalfontana@gmail.com>
Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain)
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Pl. San Francisco, s/n - 50006 Zaragoza

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Abstract: This paper aims to reconstruct the presence of *pueri delicati* in the household of Pliny the Younger. Although Pliny makes no explicit reference to the issue in his epistolary, an analysis of some of his letters shows that, probably, he, like many wealthy Romans of his time, did not refrain from the pleasure afforded by his impubescent slaves. In connection with this issue, the present study reveals some possible strategies of resistance that these children might have used against a reality that, presumably, was not as pleasant to them as it was to their master.

Keywords: *pueri delicati*, Pliny the Younger, Martial, Satyricon, sexual abuse.

Resumen: Este artículo pretende reconstruir la presencia de *pueri delicati* en el hogar de Plinio el Joven. Aunque Plinio no hace ninguna referencia explícita a la cuestión en su epistolario, el análisis de algunas de sus cartas muestra que, probablemente, él, como muchos romanos ricos de su época, no se abstenía del placer que le proporcionaban sus esclavos impúberes. En relación con esta cuestión, el presente estudio revela algunas posibles estrategias de resistencia que estos niños podrían haber utilizado contra una realidad que, presumiblemente, no les resultaba tan agradable como a su amo.

Palabras clave: *pueri delicati*, Plinio el Joven, Marcial, Satiricón, abuso sexual.

The *pueri delicati*, an uncomfortable reality of the Roman household

The aim of the present paper is to examine the possibility that Pliny the Younger, like so many other Roman masters of his time, might have enjoyed the sexual pleasure afforded by impubescent slaves, the so-called *pueri delicati*, a fact on which there is no direct evidence in his epistolary, the most significant historical source about his personal life. As a strictly domestic affair, it was probably deemed unworthy of being mentioned in his work. After all, he does not tell us anything either about his sexual relations with

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his wife or with his female slaves[1]. Although he does not make explicit statements on the issue, an analysis of some passages in his work makes this conjecture, at least in hypothetical terms, worthy of consideration.

Such analysis would further demonstrate, additionally, that Pliny's relationships with his slaves were not confined to the philanthropic and self-indulgent declarations that he often conveys in his letters:

> Confecerunt me infirmitates meorum, mortes etiam, et quidem iuvenum. Solacia duo nequaquam paria tanto dolori, solacia tamen: unum facilitas manumittendi –videor enim non omnino immaturos perdidisse, quos iam liberos perdidi–, alterum quod permitto servis quoque quasi testamenta facere, eaque ut legitima custodio. Mandant rogantque quod visum; pareo ut iussus. Dividunt donant relinquunt, dumtaxat intra domum; nam servis res publica quaedam et quasi civitas domus est. (Plin. VIII 16, 1-2)

As is well known, keeping *pueri delicati* was a perfectly normal reality in Rome at the time. Leaving aside allusions of a literary nature –such is the case of the works of Petronius, Martial or Statius– there is a wealth of testimonies demonstrating that they were not a mere poetic fantasy:

> Transeo puerorum infelicium greges, quos post transacta convivia aliae cubiculi contumeliae exspectant. Transeo agmina exoletorum per nationes coloresque discripta, ut eadem omnibus levitas sit, eadem primae mensura lanuginis, eadem species capillorum, ne quis, cui rectior est coma, crispulis misceatur. (Sen. *Epist*. 95, 24)

Here, the philosopher, in his usual condemnatory attitude towards the excesses of the wealthy of his time, describes these boys in a gloomy manner («puerorum infelicium greges»), adolescents who are explicitly designed for sexual services («agmina exoletorum [...] primae mensura lanuginis») and impubescent children who waited on the tables and who, after the banquets, also had the same destination («quos post transacta convivia aliae cubiculi contumeliae exspectant»). However, his stance on the issue is still a personal point of view that was certainly not part of the discourse of the Rome of his time. Thus, Roman epigraphy clearly reflects the existence of these *pueri delicati* –both boys and girls[2]– as a mere matter of fact, in respect of which the Roman masters see no reason for shame:

> D(is) M(anibus) | Heleneni Deli-|katae. Vix(it) ann(os) | X m(enses) V(…) I]uli(us) | Maior mil(es) cl(assis) pr(aetoriae) | Raven(natis). (*CIL* VI 3155; Roma)

1. Similarly, there is no official documentation on the many children begat between masters and their female slaves. The only testimonies about this issue are the malicious allusions by authors such as Martial (*cf*. I 81; 84).

2. Similarly, in Petronius' *Satyricon*, the prostitute Quartilla decides that her little slave Pannychis is old enough to lose her virginity and cynically declares: «"Cur non, quia bellissima occasio est, devirginatur Pannychis nostra?" Continuoque producta est puella satis bella et quae non plus quam septem annos habere videbatur (…) "Ita", inquit Quartilla, "minor est ista quam ego fui, cum primum virum passa sum? Iunonem meam iratam habeam, si unquam me meminerim virginem fuisse."» (*Sat*. 25, 1-4). Although the situation described is not the same as that of domestic slaves, the passage reflects the reality of child slaves in Rome. In some cases, they were destined for the pleasure of their pimps' clients –such is the case of Quartilla and Pannychis–; in others, they were destined for their masters' exclusive enjoyment.

> D(is) M(anibus) | Mansueti | vix(it) an(nis) X | dieb(us) XII | Aemilius | Entellus | delicato. (*CIL* XI 435; Ariminum)
>
> L(ucius) Lartius Terpinus | v(ivus) f(ecit) sibi et Corelliae | Nice coniugi | suae sanctissimae | et Corelliae Melete | delicatae suae et | libertis libertabus(que) suis. (*CIL* III 2414; Salona)[3]

Nevertheless, although the testimonies are conclusive, it must be emphasised that this is a reality that has received little attention until very recently[4]. Beyond the veil that the authors themselves spread over their personal lives, the very nature of the activities that will be described in this paper –sexual relations between adults and impubescents– has constituted an obstacle to critical analysis. In fact, for the more traditional philologists and historians, certain realities were unacceptable[5], especially when these involved individuals of high culture and social prestige on whom those scholars aspired to model themselves. Hence, except in absolutely explicit and certainly rare cases –like Virgilian Alexis (Ael. Don. *Vit. Verg*. 8)–, they were incapable of contemplating those aristocratic and noble writers involved in such sordid activities. In contrast to this attitude, this study is grounded on the idea that the historian's mission is to reconstruct the Ancient World as it was and not to recreate an idealised past that obviates its most uncomfortable aspects.

Thus, as it will be shown in the following pages, it is very likely that, despite Pliny's silence, his household also hosted this reality. What is more, the present study goes beyond the specific case –it is largely irrelevant to know whether Pliny indulged in sexual relations with his slaves–, because our interpretation of a particular passage from one of his letters (VII 27, 12-13) further allows to reconstruct, at least in hypothetical terms, what could be called a subtle strategy of child slaves' resistance to sexual abuse[6]. This

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3. Examples are plentiful and not worth accumulating. However, it is certainly interesting to add one further inscription that is particularly notable –and not only because of the age of the deceased child–: «Sex(tus) Terentius Adiectus | Adiecto delicato suo kariss(imo) | ann(orum) V posuit». (*CIL* V 8467; [Aquileia]). The onomastics of the inscription suggests that the master freed the child on his deathbed (*cf*. Mart. I 101), a practice that is also reflected in the two poetic epitaphs that Martial himself dedicates to Glaucias, a freedman who died at the age of thirteen. The wording leaves no doubt about the nature of the relationship he had with his patron: «cari deliciae breues patroni» (VI 28, 3); «quis blandior illo?» (VI 29, 5; *cf*. VI 68, 5). Moreover, Pliny himself also adheres to the custom of manumitting his slaves before their death (VIII 16, 1-2).

4. Until a few decades ago, studies on the subject were very scarce. However, in recent years, the interest of specialists in the Roman World on the issue has increased significantly and, consequently, the number of studies has multiplied. Without wishing to be exhaustive, it is worth mentioning those by Duport (1981), Nielsen (1990), Watson (1992), Laes (2003), Pollini (2003), Garrido-Hory (2005), Bernstein (2005), Leao (2006), McKeown (2007), Nikoloutsos (2007), La Monaca (2007, 2008), Verstraete (1980 and 2012), Keegan (2013), Martens (2015), Coelho dos Santos (2018), Akgoz (2020). It is only very recently that some more general works have started to be published. Thus, Harvey (2017), centred on unravelling the literary construction of the figure of the *puer delicatus* and, above all, the collective work edited by Kamen and Marshall (2021), some of whose papers will be cited below.

5. Consider, for example, the indignation of Carcopino (1941: 102), scandalised by the existence of a harem of female concubines (*concubinae*) in the house of an opulent Roman senator, a matter which Pliny himself (III 14, 3) dispatches without fuss or quibble. It is not surprising, therefore, that the work of the French savant knits a thick silence about the sexual relations between masters and slaves. Much more surprising is the fact that some translations of the past transformed these *pueri delicati* into adopted children of their masters. (Slater 1908: 75 [Stat. *Silv*. II 1; *cf*. Mart. VI 28; 29]).

6. The concept of «sexual abuse» belongs to our own time and is certainly not part of Roman discourse. Thus, Martial, who is sometimes able to denounce the extreme violence exercised towards slaves (cf. II 66),

approach is a novelty in the panorama of studies on the subject, since there is hardly any information about the feelings of these children towards the harsh reality in which they lived. But this will be discussed in the last part of the paper. Before that, it is necessary to know what Pliny had to say about the issue.

1. Pliny's attitude towards sexual relations with the *pueri delicati*

As already noted, there is no direct evidence that Pliny had sexual relations with the young slaves living in his house. However, some of his letters give us a glimpse of his fondness for handsome slaves. Thus, for example, he records that he bought a batch of slaves –he does not say how old they were– following the advice of his kinsman Plinius Paternus: «Ut animi tui iudicio sic oculorum plurimum tribuo (…) credo decentes esse servos, qui sunt empti mihi ex consilio tuo». (I 21). Without further context, it is not possible to know what he means by the term «decentes». However, from the meaning «handsomely shaped; well-formed» (Lewis-Short's *Latin Dictionary* [*s. v. decet*]), it seems that the slaves may have been particularly attractive[7].

Nevertheless, there is an even more conclusive indication that would reveal –albeit indirectly– that this was a reality that was not only familiar to him but also certainly not reprehensible in his eyes. This can be seen in an epigram he composed himself[8], which, in turn, referred to another one by Cicero in which the orator mentioned his relations with his young slave Tiro:

> Cum libros Galli legerem[9], quibus ille parenti
> ausus de Cicerone dare est palmamque decusque,
> lascivum inveni lusum Ciceronis et illo
> spectandum ingenio, quo seria condidit et quo
> humanis salibus multo varioque lepore
> magnorum ostendit mentes gaudere virorum.
> Nam queritur quod fraude mala frustratus amantem
> paucula cenato sibi debita savia Tiro
> tempore nocturno subtraxerit. His ego lectis
> «cur post haec» inquam «nostros celamus amores
> nullumque in medium timidi damus atque fatemur

sees nothing reprehensible in sexual relations between masters and slaves. However, it is very likely that, in the eyes of these children, this situation was neither desirable nor pleasurable. Hence, at least in my opinion, this is the most precise concept to describe the reality they were forced into. A different issue is that of the protection that Roman society awards children of free status, who, of course, are shielded by laws from the sexual wishes of adults. In this respect, suffice it to recall that it is their legal status –not their age– that protects them: «nemo ire quemquam publica prohibet via;/ dum ne per fundum saeptum facias semitam,/ dum ted abstineas nupta, vidua, virgine,/ iuventute et pueris liberis, ama quid lubet.» (Plaut. *Cur*. 35-38).

7. The Spanish translation by Martín Iglesias (2007: 128) is explicit: «son muy hermosos». In contrast, the English translation by J. B. Firth (1900) interprets *decentes* in a more neutral way: «are a tidy-looking lot».

8. Pliny composed a considerable amount of obscene verses, a frivolity for which he was criticised (*Epist*. IV 14 and V 3). His defense on this point was not original and was limited to the usual arguments in Latin literature: the fact that the poet wrote light verses did not mean that his sexual life was indecent. (*cf*. Cat. 16, 5-6; Ovid. *Trist*. II 354; Mart. I 35, 3).

9. This is C. Asinius Gallus, a son of C. Asinius Pollio (75 a. C.-4 d. C.), who published a pamphlet to show that his father's work was better than that of Cicero. In fact, several critics (Drumann, Carcopino) considered the epigram to be an invention of Asinius Gallus himself in order to discredit Cicero (Malaspina 1999: 156).

> Tironisque dolos, Tironis nosse fugaces
> blanditias et furta novas addentia flammas?» (Plin. VII 4, 6)

This is not the place to determine whether or not Cicero indulged in homosexual activities, an issue that must be examined within the context of the political climate of the time[10]. More relevant, on the contrary, is the debate on the authenticity of the epigram. Romano (1980: 441-447), based on linguistic arguments, asserts that it is indeed an epigram by Cicero. However, he does not place any biographical value on it, since he dismisses it as a mere youthful amusement. Instead, McDermott (1972: 259-286) considered that Tiro was rather a son of Cicero by a concubine. Therefore, he finds the idea implausible that the orator was the author of the epigram and, of course, rules out the possibility that he had any sexual relationship with the boy. For his part, Sherwin White (1966: 406) does not favour any of these alternatives and merely points out: «The subject-matter is notably absent from Cicero's letters and essays, though there was no reason for Cicero to hide what Catullus did not blush to publish». Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, it will suffice to remember that, regardless of who its creator was, Pliny believed –or at least he said so– that it had been indeed composed by Cicero[11]. And, above all, that, with his usual finesse and good humour, he used its verses to legitimise his own behaviour: «Cur post haec –inquam– nostros celamus amores?».

And, of course, Cicero was not the only model that could serve Pliny as a pretext to legitimise his passions. Consider, for example, Alexander-Alexis in Virgil's *Eclogue* II, who is reported to have been a slave given to the poet by the aforementioned C. Asinius Pollio for his sexual enjoyment (Ael. Don. *Vit. Verg*. 5)[12]. It is not surprising, then, that Pliny felt entitled to follow the example of the great poet and decided, like so many other Roman masters, to make use of the easy pleasure afforded by the young bodies of the boys who served in his house[13]:

> Tument tibi cum inguina, num, si
> ancilla aut verna est praesto puer, impetus in quem
> continuo fiat. malis tentigine rumpi?
> non ego; namque parabilem amo venerem facilemque. (Hor. *Sat*. I 2, 116-119)

10. As Martín Iglesias (2007: 406) points out in a profuse note to his translation of letter VII 4, in Cicero's own lifetime, several rumours circulated about his supposed effeminacy (μαλακία), an accusation that Plutarch (*Cic*. 7, 5) attributes to the slander of Verres. For his part, Cassius Dio (XLVI 22, 2), probably drawing on the lost *Historiae* of Asinius Pollio, refers the accusation to the Caesarian Q. Fufius Calenus. Other testimonies relating to the issue, in Ps.-Sal. *Invectiva in M. T. Ciceronem* 2, 5; Serv. *Comm. Aen*. VI 623.

11. Many traditional critics (Grollm, Soubiran, Traglia) deemed it unacceptable to attribute to Cicero the authorship of such a lewd epigram. However, as Morelli states (2003: 172), the Roman upper class was already open to this type of refined and mischievous epigrams since the time of Sulla, a fact that is demonstrated in the *graffiti* of Tiburtinus in Pompeii (*CIL* 4966-4973 = *CLE* 934-935) or in the epigram that Lutatius Catulus dedicated to the actor Sextus Roscius (2 Morel). In fact, as Morelli himself points out (2003: 171-173), the epigram displays the Hellenistic theme of the «stolen kisses» (e. g., Meleagr. *Anth. Palat*. XII 124), for which there is abundant evidence in Latin literature of Cicero's time (*cf*. Cat. 99, 1-2). For a detailed analysis of the question, see Malaspina (1999: 174-179).

12. The archetype of Alexis as a pleasure slave is evoked by Martial in VI 68.

13. It is quite another thing for Pliny to express his displeasure at the public display of effeminate, shameless and lewd slaves and comedians (*cf*. Petr. *Sat*. 70, 8). Thus, in *Epist*. IX 17 he echoes the complaints of his friend Genitor, who has attended a banquet ruined by the performance of some repulsive «scurrae cinaedi moriones».

2. Only a literary secretary?

As said above, there is no explicit testimony that Pliny had sexual and emotional relationships with his slaves. Nevertheless, the sorrow he expresses at the death of some of them («confecerunt me infirmitates meorum, mortes etiam, et quidem iuvenum…» [VIII 16, 1]) is very similar to the one Martial portrays when describing the grief of a certain Melior after the death of his little slave Glaucias (VI 28; 29)[14]; and very similar also to that of Flavius Ursus in Statius' *Silva* II 6 after the death of Philetus, a slave whom he loved tenderly.

In fact, Sherwin-White (1966: 467) conjectures that one of the deceased mentioned by Pliny is perhaps Encolpius, a servant who was seriously ill shortly before (VIII 1, 2-3)[15] and whom Pliny praises as a sort of secretary in his literary pursuits, but also in other activities of a pleasurable nature («ille seria nostra, ille deliciae» [VIII 1, 2]). It is not easy to determine precisely what he meant by this. However, the term *deliciae* –directly related to the concept of *puer delicatus* (Galán Vioque 2002: 120)– is highly suggestive, insofar as it forms part of the specific lexicon of Latin erotic literature (*cf*. Cic. *Dom*. 62; Cat. 3, 4; 6, 1; Quint. I, 2, 9; Mart. VI 28, 3; Juv. IV, 4; VI 47; XIII 140; Stat. *Silv*. V 67). Moreover, it is very likely that, just as Cicero did with Tiro, Pliny might have also decided to reward his slave by giving him a good education, an attitude not uncommon among Roman high society. This was the case with Terence, whose master, the senator P. Terentius Lucanus, provided him with a careful education: «ob ingenium et formam institutus modo liberaliter» (Suet. *Vit. Ter*. 1). The same could be said of some of Virgil's sexual slaves, to whom the poet also gave literary instruction:

> Libidinis in pueros pronioris, quorum maxime dilexit Cebetem et Alexandrum, quem secunda *Bucolicorum* egloga Alexim appellat, donatum sibi ab Asinio Pollione, utrumque non ineruditum, Cebetem vero et poetam. (Ael. Don. *Vit. Verg*. 9)

Therefore, it would not be unimaginable that Pliny would have followed in Virgil's footsteps and given his favourite a good education[16], a gift that, apparently, the boy accepted with affection and gratitude. After all, it guaranteed his future position in his master's household. However, the plan was thwarted by destiny when Encolpius became seriously ill:

> Encolpius quidem lector, ille seria nostra ille deliciae, exasperatis faucibus pulvere sanguinem reiecit. Quam triste hoc ipsi, quam acerbum mihi, si is cui omnis ex studiis gratia inhabilis studiis fuerit! Quis deinde libellos meos sic leget, sic amabit? (Plin. VIII 1, 2)

> Confecerunt me infirmitates meorum, mortes etiam, et quidem iuvenum. Solacia duo nequaquam paria tanto dolori, solacia tamen: unum facilitas manumittendi –videor enim non omnino immaturos perdidisse, quos iam liberos perdidi–, alterum quod permitto servis quoque quasi testamenta facere, eaque ut legitima custodio. (Plin. VIII 16, 1)

14. A subject also treated as *consolatio* in the *Silva* II 1 of Statius himself.

15. According to Sherwin-White (1966: 448), the letter is dated the summer of 107 AD.

16. This circumstance would explain, as will be seen below, the mention of this freedman as a learned person («Est libertus mihi non illitteratus» [*Epist*. VII 27, 12]).

3. A wonderful tale

The last and most interesting of the testimonies to be analysed in this paper belongs to a secondary passage of one of Pliny the Younger's *Epistulae* (VII 27, 12-14)[17] whose significance has not been convincingly explained by critics. Before entering into the analysis of the text, it is worth remembering that –at least in the state in which they have come down to us –Pliny's *Epistulae* are not real letters but delicate literary pieces in which the writer shows off his culture and rhetorical skills. In this case, Pliny, under the pretext of consulting his friend Licinius Sura on the controversial question of ghosts and supernatural experiences, tells him three stories, the most famous of which is that of the haunted house in Athens (VII 27, 5-11)[18]. The last, and shortest, of the three pieces that conform his letter is the passage that we are focusing on in this analysis[19]:

> Et haec quidem affirmantibus credo; illud affirmare aliis possum. Est libertus mihi non illitteratus. Cum hoc minor frater eodem lecto quiescebat. Is visus est sibi cernere quendam in toro residentem, admoventemque capiti suo cultros, atque etiam ex ipso vertice amputantem capillos. Ubi illuxit, ipse circa verticem tonsus, capilli iacentes reperiuntur. Exiguum temporis medium, et rursus simile aliud priori fidem fecit. Puer in paedagogio mixtus pluribus dormiebat. Venerunt per fenestras –ita narrat– in tunicis albis duo cubantemque detonderunt et qua venerant recesserunt. Hunc quoque tonsum sparsosque circa capillos dies ostendit. (Plin. *Epist*. VII 27, 12-13).

In this double story there is a very obvious fact that Pliny nevertheless leaves out of his account: that, regardless of possible supernatural components, the haircuts described must have occurred in the real world. The boys lived in the same house as their master, and whether or not he had personally seen the actual hair cut and scattered around their beds, he must have noticed the obvious change in the boys' appearance. Accordingly, this analysis starts from the idea that the boys appeared with their hair cut short and, to their master's astonishment, told him the two intriguing anecdotes –both very similar– that will be the subject of this study.

Pliny's omission is not the result of a mere accidental oversight. In fact, it is part of the communicative strategy that leads his exposition of the subject[20]. His aim is to introduce

17. The letter is dated after the years 104-106 AD (Martín Iglesias 2007: 442). It would therefore have been composed after the end of Pliny's *cura Tiberis* (*cf*. V 14, 2). According to this chronology, the events narrated must have taken place approximately ten years earlier. Its addressee, L. Licinius Sura, is an important senator from Tarraco, and also a friend of Trajan, who was consul three times. (Sherwin-White 1966: 751).

18. The bibliography on this episode is quite extensive. However, insofar as this work does not focus on this passage, may it suffice to provide a few key references: Stramaglia 1999: 119-183; Felton 1999: 62-76 and Ogden 2014: 101-117. It goes without saying that the story has very close parallels in the literature of antiquity. Thus, Lucianus (*Philops*. 30-31) narrates a similar case occurred in Corinth.

19. As Sherwin-White's commentary (1966: 437) underlines, the sequence of three supernatural stories is due to the fact that «Pliny observes the *lex scholastica* which required three examples to illustrate a point». That is to say, the letter, centred on the debate on the supernatural, presents the three exempla de rigeur in order to provide the addressee with the necessary argumentative material to reach a decision on the proposed subject (*cf*. VII 27, 15-16).

20. The two stories are very similar, differing only in minor details that are actually part of a narrative construction designed to underline the mystery surrounding the events: in the first story, the boy tells how he has witnessed an unknown individual («quendam») cut his little brother's hair. In the second one, the narrative takes on more mysterious overtones, as it is the other child who describes personally («ita narrat») the appearance of the two enigmatic barbers dressed in white.

the addressee –and, obviously, us, his readers– to the debate on the supernatural and not to a colourful report on one of the many minutiae that must have been going on in a great Roman household. Hence, he deliberately silences the fact that he must have seen his slaves shaven, a circumstance that would take him away from the subject of the letter and introduce him into a quite different thematic area.

Besides, it should be noted that both stories have some of the features of traditional folktales[21]. The appearance of these mysterious barbers is not just a dream. It has real consequences. Similarly, in the story of the werewolf in the *Satyricon*, the monster has received a wound while attacking the sheep of a flock. However, the most shocking thing of all is that, the next morning, he was able to regain his human form but not his physical integrity: «iacebat miles meus in lecto tanquam bovis, et collum illius medicus curabat.» (Petr. *Sat*. 62)[22]. In a very similar way, in spite of a certain and inevitable initial mistrust[23], Pliny, upon hearing the stories, feels obliged to assume that everything happened in reality, since the prodigious haircut had verifiable effects: «Ubi inluxit, ipse circa verticem tonsus, capilli iacentes reperiuntur»; «hunc quoque tonsum sparsosque circa capillos dies ostendit».

3.1. A hypothesis about the meaning of the story

In contrast to the modern mind, inclined to take these accounts as reflections of the desires and anxieties of those who reported them, Pliny candidly took for granted that the events related to his own person and to his own personal destiny:

> Nihil notabile secutum, nisi forte quod non fui reus, futurus, si Domitianus sub quo haec acciderunt diutius vixisset. Nam in scrinio eius datus a Caro de me libellus inventus est; ex quo coniectari potest, quia reis moris est summittere capillum, recisos meorum capillos depulsi quod imminebat periculi signum fuisse. (Plin. *Epist*. VII 27 14)[24]

21. The motif of the «ghost barber» is not unknown in folk tales and is included in Aarne and Thompson's classification (E571). For example, the Dutch story of the young man who wants to learn what fear is and to do so undergoes a number of frightening experiences: playing cards with the devil in church; stealing a ghost's clothes; staying one night under a gallows, etc. The trial that interests us here is that of being shaved by a ghost (Aarne and Thompson 1973: 114). In any case, as will be shown throughout the paper, despite the coincidence of motives, the tale of Pliny's slaves has a very different meaning.

22. The motif of material evidence left behind by supernatural beings –and by ghosts in particular– is frequent in the work of Phlegon of Tralles (2nd century AD). This would explain the ring and pectoral that the ghost of Philinnion, a deceased girl, gives to young Machates, which, of course, are immediately recognised by her parents. (Phleg. Trall. *Prod*. 1).

23. Thus, Baraz (2012: 127) points out that Pliny tries to dissociate himself from the account: «He distances himself from the event in a number of ways. First, the visions occur to members of his *familia*, not himself, and second, the explanation is offered in a carefully ambiguous way: Pliny first says that it appeared that nothing of note had followed, but perhaps there was an explanation, and when he offers an interpretation of the cutting of the hair he introduces it with *coniectari potest*». However, these reservations are of a merely rhetorical nature. After all, the story displays a good number of communicative elements reinforcing credibility: «Et haec quidem adfirmantibus credo». (Plin. *Epist*. VII 27, 12).

24. In any case, it should not be lost sight that Pliny himself expresses his doubts –and even his scepticism– about the meaning of dreams (I 18, 1-2). It is also quite possible that this story was intended as an account of a supernatural experience and not of a dream. However, as Pelling points out (1997: 197), «[the prophetic dream] is hard to distinguish from the 'night-time vision', and indeed it is sometimes hard with dreams in ancient literature to tell whether the recipient is asleep or not».

Thus, for Pliny –and surely for many other Roman masters as well– slaves and freedmen, insofar as they were not masters of their own existence, did not have an autonomous psychic life either. In fact, this perception of reality was not only the fruit of a mere spontaneous assumption, but also a theory strongly supported by the reflections of the highest intellectual authorities:

> … τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ συμφέρει τῷ μέρει καὶ τῷ ὅλῳ, καὶ σώματι καὶ ψυχῇ, ὁ δὲ δοῦλος μέρος τι τοῦ δεσπότου, οἷον ἔμψυχόν τι τοῦ σώματος κεχωρισμένον δὲ μέρος: διὸ καὶ συμφέρον ἐστί τι καὶ φιλία δούλῳ καὶ δεσπότῃ πρὸς ἀλλήλους τοῖς φύσει τούτων ἠξιωμένοις. (Arist. *Pol*. 1255b)

Similarly, Artemidorus of Daldis (2nd century AD) developed this idea by taking it to divination through the interpretation of dreams:

> Ἅμα τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀποτελέσμασιν οἱ δοῦλοι καὶ πρὸς τὸ σῶμα τῶν δεσποτῶν τὴν ἀναφορὰν ἔχουσιν. ὁ γοῦν δόξας τὸν οἰκέτην πυρέσσοντα ἰδεῖν εἰκότως αὐτὸς ἐνόσησεν. (Artem. *Oneir*. IV 30)

Of course, the Ancient World was well aware that slaves also had dreams (*cf*. Plaut. *Curc*. 248-251). However, the ruling classes of antiquity had no interest in accounting for realities –and above all voices– which could pose a threat to the established order. Especially if they were dreams about the freedom of the slaves themselves[25] –not to mention the possibility of their rebellion (*cf*. Diod. Sic. XXXIV 5)–:

> Además, resulta llamativo que en la obra de Artemidoro sólo se haga referencia a situaciones que se podrían considerar como normales dentro del sistema socio-político. No existen ejemplos o referencias sobre esclavos que se enfrentaran al sistema, ya fuera tratando de escapar o por otros medios. Esto lleva a pensar que el tipo de respuestas oraculares que proporcionaba Artemidoro no eran genuinas; no reflejaban necesariamente la mentalidad de los esclavos, sino que las respuestas que se ofrecían eran reinterpretadas y reformuladas por el especialista. (Alvar Nuño 2017: 47)

This is probably why the owners and masters of freedmen and slaves preferred to consider their supernatural experiences –be they dreams or visions– as phenomena referring

25. It is quite logical that slaves should show great interest in their future freedom (*cf*. Plaut. *Poen*. 1205-1206). In this regard, a epigraphic text of the third century BC from Boeotia attests the dream of a slave very concerned about securing their freedom: «[– – ἐφ' ὦι τε] | Μόσχον Φρ[υνίδαι παραμένειν ἐνιαυ] | τὸν καὶ εἶναι ἐλεύθερον μη[δενὶ μηδὲ]ν | προσήκοντα· ἐὰν δέ τι πάθηι Φρυνίδας | πρὸ τοῦ τὸγ χρόνον διεξελθεῖν, ἐλεύθερο[ς] | ἀπίτω Μόσχος οὗ ἂν αὐτὸς βούληται· | τύχηι ἀγαθῆι· μάρτυρες· Ἀθηνόδωρος | Μνασικῶντος Ὡρώπιος, Βίοττος Εὐδίκου | Ἀθηναῖος, Χαρῖνος Ἀντιχάρμου Ἀθηναῖος, | Ἀθηνάδης Ἐπιγόνου Ὡρώπιος, Ἵππων Αἰσχύ|λου Ὡρώπιος· Μόσχος Μοσχίωνος Ἰουδαῖος | ἐνύπνιον ἰδὼν προστάξαντος τοῦ θεοῦ | Ἀμφιαράου καὶ τῆς Ὑγείας καθ' ἃ συνέταξε | ὁ Ἀμφιάραος καὶ ἡ Ὑγίεια ἐν στήληι γράψαντα | ἀναθεῖναι πρὸς τῶι βωμῶι». (*Epigr. tou Oropou* 329). Leaving aside the linguistic difficulties of the text –and certain religious issues that are not noteworthy–, what is relevant here is the situation described: on the one hand, there is a Jewish slave named Moschos; on the other hand, a certain Phrynidas (a citizen of Oropos who is his owner), who has promised him his freedom within a year. The slave, distrustful of what could be an easily forgettable outburst of generosity, called five witnesses to solemnise the master's promise in the temple of the local hero Amphiaraos, who, in the company of Hygieia, would have appeared to him in a dream ordering him to put the whole agreement in writing.

to themselves. Indeed, following Aristotle's aforementioned reasoning –and in practice in line with the logic of reality itself– this discourse reflects what was an incontrovertible truth in the eyes of the ancients: It was the master's fate that determined the fate of his slaves and, therefore, the slaves' dreams, rather than referring to themselves, must be messages concerning the fate of their master[26]. Thus, Pliny naturally considered –albeit in hindsight– that the mysterious haircut of his slaves was a premonition that he would eventually escape prosecution in one of the sham trials orchestrated by Domitian. («quia reis moris est summittere capillum»), a danger he was able to avert thanks to the tyrant's death (96 AD)[27].

However, as understandable as it is that Pliny projected his own fears onto the narratives of his slaves, it is more likely that the boys' stories had more to do with their own experiences and desires than with those of his master[28]. After all, is it credible that these children were aware of the vicissitudes and dangers of their master? Could it not rather be that these stories were, in fact, a subtle message that the boys were trying to send to him indirectly? As already mentioned, this hypothesis is based on the idea that it was they themselves who cut their hair in order to concoct an amazing story designed to make their master realise that supernatural barbers had decided it was time for their master to stop using them in his bed.

Obviously, the author of this paper lacks the ability to delve into the minds and intentions of individuals of the past. However, the motif of the haircut has a range of meanings in antiquity that could help us to unravel the possible meaning of the story. According to Pliny's own interpretation, those haircuts meant that he would be spared from being put on trial. Mysterious «ghosts» had cut the children's hair, which, it would seem, was a signal that the slaves, mere appendages of their master, would no longer have to grow it, a specular response of what Pliny himself would have had to do if the malevolent accusation of Mettius Carus had been successful: «reis moris est summittere capillum.» (Plin. *Epist*. VII 27, 14).

However, it should not be forgotten that the haircut had many other meanings in antiquity[29]. For instance, Felton (1999: 119) notes that it was often a practice associated with mourning. Thus, Achilles and Orestes lay locks of their hair on the tombs of Patro-

26. Thus, Plutarch (*Cic*. 2, 1) narrates that Cicero's wet nurse –probably a slave girl– had an apparition («τῇ δὲ τίτθῃ φάσμα δοκεῖ…») announcing the future glory of the infant. Similarly, Aelius Aristides (*Or*. XLVIII 9, 11) relates that the god Asclepius, taking the form of the proconsul Salvius, appeared in a dream to the slave who took care of him and suggested remedies for his illness. However, note that, in this case, the meaning of the slave's dream is transparent. In contrast, the experience narrated by Pliny's slaves is much more ambiguous.

27. The author of the incriminating letter against Pliny is Mettius Carus (*cf*. VII 19, 5).

28. The idea that dreams are sent by the gods (*cf*. Hom. *Il*. II 1-10) was not unanimously accepted in Antiquity. Thus, some statements can also be found, albeit in the minority, which express that dreams are, in reality, the product of the individual's own psychic life: «Somnia quae mentes ludunt volitantibus umbris, / non delubra deum nec ab aethere numina mittunt, / sed sibi quisque facit». (Petr. *Sat*. fr. 30, 1).

29. In the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus of Daldis, there is no specific section on the possible meaning of dreams in which a haircut appears. However, it is possible that the motif of long hair –the antithesis of the haircut– may give us some clue as to the meaning the dream might have had at the time: «Τὸ δὲ δοκεῖν χοιρείας ἔχειν τρίχας κινδύνους ἐπάγει βιαίους καὶ τοιούτους, οἵοις ὑποπίπτει τὸ ζῶιον, λέγω δὲ ὁ χοῖρος. ἱππείας δὲ ἔχειν τρίχας δουλείαν καὶ ταλαιπωρίαν σημαίνει καὶ τοῖς εὖ γεγονόσι. δούλοις δὲ καὶ δεσμὰ περιτίθησιν». (I 20). Did the children know these interpretative clues? Did they think that their supernatural experience was announcing their freedom? As we shall see, our interpretation differs greatly from these ideas.

clus and Agamemnon (Hom. *Il*. XXIII 138-153; Soph. *Electr*. 51-53)[30]. Martín Iglesias (2007: 446) explains that those who had to travel by sea let their hair grow long and only cut it when they reached their harbor (Petr. *Sat*. 104, 5; Val. Flacc. *Arg*. I 378-379): aware of the danger they faced, they consecrated their hair to the gods and, having overcome the danger, they fulfilled their vow. On the basis of this idea, Martín Iglesias himself suggests the hypothesis that «cuando sus amos estaban en peligro, los esclavos se dejaban crecer el pelo como voto a los dioses por la salvación de aquellos», which fits in well with the interpretation that Pliny gives to the event. In fact, it is possible to present some other similar cases. Thus, the following epigram by Martial does not describe a situation identical to the one mentioned, but it does make explicit that the slave Encolpus has cut his hair as a grateful offering to the gods because his master has attained the rank of centurion primipilus:

> Hos tibi, Phoebe, uouet totos a uertice crines
> Encolpos, domini centurionis amor,
> grata Pudens meriti tulerit cum praemia pili.
> Quam primum longas, Phoebe, recide comas,
> dum nulla teneri sordent lanugine uoltus
> dumque decent fusae lactea colla iubae. (Mart. I 31, 1-6).

However, although this reading fits very well with the aforementioned interpretation, it would be very plausible that the motif of the haircut has a very different meaning, since neither Martín Iglesias nor Felton take into account that this practice is also a symbol of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Moreover, in the specific case of child slaves, it was a sign that they should no longer be an object of pleasure for their masters:

> Quid non cogit amor! Secuit nolente capillos
> Encolpos domino, non prohibente tamen.
> Permisit fleuitque Pudens: sic cessit habenis
> audaci questus de Phaethonte pater;
> talis raptus Hylas, talis deprensus Achilles
> deposuit gaudens, matre dolente, comas.
> Sed tu ne propera –breuibus ne crede capillis–
> tardaque pro tanto munere, barba, ueni. (Mart. V 48)

Two different motifs intersect in these two epigrams: on the one hand, the votive sacrifice of the slave's hair (I 31); on the other hand, the long hair as a symbol of the sexual relations that the young boy has with his master (V 48)[31]. In I 31 the slave has cut his hair as a token of gratitude to the gods. Nevertheless, the poet emphasises his wish that the haircut should not be misinterpreted as a passage to adulthood for the boy, who must

30. Likewise, Eur. *Hyp*. 1425-1426; Asclep. *Anth. Palat*. VII 145; Antipatr. VII 241.

31. The motif of the long hair of pleasure slaves is reiterated extensively in the work of Martial: «Lumina sideribus certent mollesque flagellant/ colla comae…» (IV 42, 7-8). The nature of this paper –focused on the analysis of literary texts– prevents us from delving into archaeological issues. However, it is worth mentioning, even in passing, the case of the Warren Cup or the splendid balsamarium from Ostippo (Estepa, province of Seville, in Spain), in whose images it is possible to appreciate that the boys being penetrated by the adults have a long tuft of hair reaching down to their shoulders. A description of both pieces, in Williams (2006) and Caldera (1986: 211-218).

remain as the «domini centurionis amor» for a long time still: «and, that both master and favourite may long enjoy your gifts, make him carry shorn, but late a man». (I 31, 7-8).

Indeed, as Gonzales points out (2017: 108), the child –and *a fortiori* the child slave–, insofar as he has not yet acquired sexual maturity and the virile condition, is in a situation that, in a way, feminises him, a circumstance that makes him an object of sexual desire. This is evidenced in symbolic terms by the long hair, which obviously evokes the provisional femininity of which he is a prisoner. This is a perception of sexuality marked by the idea that legitimate pleasure is vertical and intended to highlight power and social domination[32]. A sexuality, therefore, built on a series of clearly marked polarities: *masculine/feminine; active/passive; strong/weak; worthy/unworthy; master/slave*[33]. Hence, for example, Martial's insistence on restricting male sexual contact to that which can be had with impubescent slaves:

> Mollia quod nivei duro teris ore Galaesi
> basia, quod nudo cum Ganymede jaces,
> –quis negat?–hoc nimium'st. Sed sit satis; inguina saltem
> parce fututrici sollicitare manu.
> Levibus in pueris plus haec quam mentula peccat
> et faciunt digiti praecipitantque virum:
> inde tragus celeresque pili mirandaque matri
> barba, nec in clara balnea luce placent. (Mart. XI 22, 1-8; likewise, VI 28, 3; VI 29, 5; VI 68, 5; XI 26; XIV 205)[34]

Such is the life that Trimalchio, the protagonist of the famous dinner in the *Satyricon*, would have led in his childhood. Having come from Asia to Italy as a slave, he began his prosperity and social ascent when his master noticed his charms upon the death of his former favourite:

> Cum adhuc capillatus essem, nam a puero vitam Chiam gessi, ipsimi nostri delicatus decessit, mehercules margaritum, <sacritus> et omnium numerum. (Petr. *Sat*. 63, 3)

With this allusion to his long hair, Trimalchio implies that he spent his early years as a *puer delicatus* after the death of the aforementioned boy:

> Tam magnus ex Asia veni, quam hic candelabrus est. Ad summam, quotidie me solebam ad illum metiri, et ut celerius rostrum barbatum haberem, labra de lucerna ungebam. Tamen ad delicias ipsimi annos quattuordecim fui. Nec turpe est, quod dominus iubet. Ego tamen

32. For an overview of the influence of gender theories and postmodern analyses on sexuality studies in the Ancient World, see Ormand (2013: 54-68).

33. Analyses on the sexual life of slaves in antiquity have multiplied in recent decades. A few examples are Gonfroy (1978: 219-262); Garrido-Hory (2005: 125-137); Cohen (2013: 184-198).

34. For a detailed commentary on the epigram, see Kay (1985: 118-121). Among the aspects detailed in his analysis, it stands out the fact that the poem is based on an idea already expressed by some Greek authors (1985: 118): that it is desirable that the boy who plays the passive role in the relationship should keep himself not only from being sexually aroused, but also from receiving any pleasure (*cf*. Xen. *Symp*. 8, 21; Plat. *Phaedr*. 240d). However, the testimonies of Greek literature itself reveal that masturbation of boys was common in pederastic relationships (Aristoph. *Aves* 142 and 443; Adeo *Anthol. Pal*. X 20; Petr. *Sat*. 86, 1).

et ipsimae satis faciebam. Scitis quid dicam: taceo, quia non sum de gloriosis. (Petr. *Sat*. 75, 11; *cf*. 57, 9-10)

In fact, as he acknowledges while displaying the utmost cynicism: «nec turpe est quod dominus iubet». (*Sat*. 75, 11)[35]. After all, he also has his own *puer delicatus* (*Sat*. 64, 5-11; 75, 4-6), which speaks to a reality that becomes even more evident in Martial's various epigrams in which he alludes to the motif of the haircutting of the master's favourite slave[36]:

Thestyle, Victoris tormentum dulce Voconi,
quo nemo est toto notior orbe puer,
sic etiam positis formonsus amere capillis
et placeat uati nulla puella tuo:
paulisper domini doctos sepone libellos,
carmina Victori dum lego parua tuo.
Et Maecenati, Maro cum cantaret Alexin,
nota tamen Marsi fusca Melaenis erat. (Mart. VII 29)

Consilium formae speculum dulcisque capillos
Pergameo posuit dona sacrata deo
ille puer tota domino gratissimus aula,
nomine qui signat tempora verna suo.
Felix quae tali censetur munere tellus!
nec Ganymedeas mallet habere comas. (Mart. IX 16)[37]

Having sex with slaves who had crossed the puberty threshold gave rise to a very problematic situation within the framework of the established order, insofar as they were already able to perform penetration, which gave rise to a potential attack against common sense and social orthodoxy. The only sexual practice «allowed» with these children is anal penetration[38], since, according to the belief of the time, the practice of masturbation would hasten their sexual maturation (Sullivan 1991: 42-43), as can be inferred from this epigram:

Vendere, Tucca, potes centenis milibus emptos?
Plorantis dominos vendere, Tucca, potes?

35. In this respect, it is worth recalling the famous quote by the orator Haterius (1st century AD) which reflects the situation that fate reserved for young slaves: «impudicitia in ingenuo crimen est, in servo necessitas, in liberto officium». (*apud* Sen. *Controversiae* IV 7, 10). What was an inescapable reality for slaves was an unforgivable vice in the case of free men, obviously destined to play an active and dominating role over their inferiors (*cf*. Plin. *Epist*. III 3, 4; VII 24, 3; Quint. *Inst*. II 2, 14).

36. In contrast, the poet considers that tables served by slaves with shaven hair («… et tonso pura ministro». [XI 11, 3]) is a mark of an austerity worthy of the virtuous Roman past. Similarly, the aging Martial, now returned to his native Bilbilis, seems perfectly happy to have young Hispanic slaves with shaved hair serving in his household (XII 18, 24-25). It is obvious that he had already stilled his youthful desires and passions.

37. The poem is dedicated to Earinus, a young eunuch, Domitian's favourite, who is also the main character of Statius' silva III 4. Note how the poem emphasises the motif of the long hair of Ganymede, the Trojan shepherd boy abducted by Jupiter (*cf*. Hom. *Il* XX 230). Likewise, and with the same topic, Mart. IX 17 and IX 36. The cliché of the hair of the *puer delicatus* is also found in Statius (*Silv*. II 1, 45-46).

38. A simple example of Martial's contempt for masters who submit to sexual relations with slaves who have already passed puberty is enough to illustrate this: «Mentula cum doleat puero, tibi, Naeuole, culus,/ non sum diuinus, sed scio quid facias». (III 71). Similarly, VII 14 and Juv. VI 376-378.

Nec te blanditiae, nec verba rudesve querelae,
nec te dente tuo saucia colla movent?
ah facinus! Tunica patet inguen utrimque levata,
inspiciturque tua mentula facta manu. (Mart. XI 70, 1-6)

We, people of the 21st century, are shocked and offended by the harsh scene of the public sale of those boys drenched in tears. Not to mention the brutal image of their avid buyers undressing them to appreciate their delicate bodies (*cf*. Mart. IX 59, 3-6). However, in Martial's eyes, this Tucca has committed even worse «sins»: on the one hand, by having masturbated them, he has hastened their sexual development («inspiciturque tua mentula facta manu» [«and their cocks, formed by your hand, will be inspected»]); and, on the other hand, he is reproached for having degraded himself as it is insinuated that Tucca would also submit to penetration by the now sexually developed youths, which warrants their being called his «dominos». This circumstance, of course, calls into question the masculinity and dignity of a master who enjoys the pleasure of being penetrated by his slaves, who have been destined by fate to maintain an exclusively passive role (*cf*. Mart. VII 62)[39]:

Viderat Ausonium posito modo crine ministrum
Phryx puer, alterius gaudia nota Iovis:
«Quod tuus ecce suo Caesar permisit ephebo
tu permitte tuo, maxime rector» ait;
«iam mihi prima latet longis lanugo capillis,
iam tua me ridet Iuno vocatque virum».
Cui pater aetherius «Puer o dulcissime», dixit,
«non ego quod poscis, res negat ipsa tibi:
Caesar habet noster similis tibi mille ministros
tantaque sidereos vix capit aula mares;
at tibi si dederit vultus coma tonsa viriles,
quis mihi qui nectar misceat alter erit?» (Mart. IX 36)

3.2. Return to Pliny's home

Even if, in their master's eyes, these children were mere objects of his desire, it is very likely that they did not regard the matter in the same way and concocted a wonderful story to escape the situation: two mysterious individuals –here it is not important to determine whether they were magicians or ghosts[40]– had decided to cut their hair, which meant that it was no longer decorous for the master to continue to have sexual relations with them.

In fact, this analysis of the story confronts us with a reality about which there is little information: That of the feelings and emotions of the child slaves who provided sexual services for their masters. Martial's frivolous epigrams assume that the boys willingly

39. According to the Roman perception of sexuality, the fact that a master has active sexual relations with his slaves does not make him an *effeminatus*, an infamy he would only fall into if he agreed to assume a passive role with them (Williams 1999: 160-194). In this respect, a simple example is the case of Martial himself, who boasts endlessly about his sexual relations with prepubescent slaves (Mart. XI 23; XI, 43), without his masculinity being called into question.

40. In a recent publication, the author of this work tries to demonstrate that the mysterious figures gliding through the windows of Pliny's *paedagogium* correspond to the type of Egyptian magician in vogue among the Roman upper class of the time (Fontana Elboj 2023: 80-84).

agreed to have sex with their owners («Saepe et nolentem cogat nolitque uolentem…» [IV 42, 11]). Even more exaggerated are the contrived verses of Statius, a contemporary of Martial, intended, as noted above, to console Flavius Ursus for the loss of his *puer delicatus*:

> … hominem gemis (heu mihi! subdo
> ipse faces), hominem, Vrse, tuum, cui dulce volenti
> servitium, cui triste nihil, qui sponte sibique
> imperiosus erat. (Stat. *Silv*. II 6, 14-17)

However, it is more than likely that masters often used violence and beatings to achieve their ends, a clear sign that these were relationships in which the pleasure was neither mutual nor consensual:

> Basia dum nolo nisi quae luctantia carpsi,
> et placet ira mihi plus tua quam facies,
> ut te saepe rogem, caedo, Diadumene, saepe:
> consequor hoc, ut me nec timeas nec ames. (Mart. V 46)

In other words, the children must not have experienced the same pleasure as their masters in sharing the bed with them and they resorted to all possible tricks to escape their desires. In this respect, the words of Trimalchio are very significant: «… et ut celerius rostrum barbatum haberem, labra de lucerna ungebam». (Petr. *Sat*. 75, 11). The young boy did not hesitate to smear himself with oil in order to hasten the growth of the beard and thus put a stop to his master's abuse[41].

It is not desirable to speculate too much on the matter, but it is possible that the first haircut could well have been performed by the first «receiver» of the vision, the older brother of the shaven boy. Perhaps with the intention of sparing the little boy an unpleasant ordeal that he himself had already been through[42]. If so, the example would have spread through Pliny's *paedagogium* and, some time later, another of the little ones would also have «suffered» the same «supernatural experience».

According to this hypothesis, these children resorted to a cunning manoeuvre –nothing to do with that «plaisanterie de collégien d'internat» as Wolff describes it with a certain naivety (2003: 91)– to convey their message to Pliny. It is not that they had resorted to the mysterious barbers. Rather, it was the children themselves who, on their own, decided to come to their beds and cut their hair. With this formula, the boys were safe from the risks that slaves took when they had recourse to a sorcerer[43]. Instead of calling the magicians,

41. For an analysis of Trimalchio's discourse from the slave's point of view, see Roth (2021: 211-237).

42. At this point, one might ask whether this freedman («libertus mihi non illitteratus» [VII 27, 12]) could not be Encolpius, the clerk mentioned in the letter VIII 1, 2 (107 AD). Of course, it is not possible to know for certain. However, if so, it would show that he did not consider it a pleasant privilege to have been his master's delight, which would have induced him to concoct a wonderful story to save his little brother.

43. Thus, Cato the Elder warns that the *vilicus* must consult neither haruspices nor augurs nor soothsayers nor Chaldeans (*Agr*. 5, 4). Similarly, Columela (I 8, 5-6). As Alvar Nuño (2017: 49) points out, slaves were strictly forbidden to go to fortune tellers and, of course, to consult with them about the health of their masters. Such an act was punishable by the cross for the slave, and banishment or work in the mines for the fortune teller (Paul. *Sent*. V 21, 3-4). However, despite the restrictions, there is evidence that slaves sometimes also consulted oracles in order to find out what fate awaited them (Eidinow 2012: 247).

they had become agents in a mysterious situation that they left to their master to decipher. Nor, of course, did they at any time attribute divinatory powers to themselves, for that would not have benefited them either[44]. The manoeuvre described here was much more subtle: the boys merely narrated a disturbing experience that they left to their master's interpretation. They, as slaves, had no right to express their own desires. Not even through dreams or supernatural experiences.

However, the fact that the legal sources or the aristocratic literature of the time denied them the possibility of expressing their desires and fears does not mean, of course, that they did not have them. In fact, magical texts constitute a privileged window to glimpse the anxieties and longings of the most disadvantaged groups in antiquity (Alvar Nuño 2017: 41-68). After all, magic is a subsystem of religion destined to overcome the barriers and difficulties imposed by reality and, therefore, constitutes a space for the underprivileged and marginalised to find a remedy for the injustices and sorrows they suffer[45].

Yet, far from resorting to sorcery[46], from pretending to be epileptic, or from drinking concoctions to make believe they were dead –as the young maidens in Xenophon of Ephesus' work do to escape the brothel or unwanted marriages (*Ephes*. V 7; III 7, 1)–, those children operated in a more indirect and, of course, less dangerous way for them. In this sense, we would be faced with evidence of what could be understood as the use of the marvellous tale as an element of resistance –an intelligent and sophisticated resistance– of the oppressed against their oppressors[47]:

> Slavery could be seen as an asymmetrical negotiation of power between masters and slaves: a relationship not unilaterally defined from above, but the outcome of struggle, negotiation, compromise and failure. From this point of view, slave hopes would focus on limiting the power of masters and putting forward their own agenda of aims to the extent of the possible. (Vlassopoulos 2018: 244).

44. Thus, the jurist Vivianus (*Dig*. XXI 1, 1, 9-10 [= Ulp. 1 *Ad aed. curul*.]) asserts that prophetic skills are to be considered a *vitium animi* in the slave. Is this an allusion to possible cases of epilepsy, or is it perhaps rather a fear towards individuals with prophetic gifts capable of leading a slave rebellion? (*cf*. Plut. *Cras*. 8; Cic. *Leg*. II 37; Liv. XXXIX 29, 8-9)? However, it should not be lost sight of the fact that some Roman masters did have slaves with divinatory gifts. Thus, the dictator Sulla made use of the predictions of a slave falling into prophetic frenzy (Plut. *Syll*. 27).

45. In contrast to this view –advocated as valid only for the specific case here examined– Alvar Nuño asserts: «Desde mi punto de vista, la magia, como recurso cultural que es, opera dentro del sistema de enajenación del esclavo, y no como una forma de resistencia y de contestación al orden establecido en el plano de lo sobrenatural». (2017: 32).

46. Thus, a Late Antique Greek inscription found in Rome (*SEG* 50, 1065) gives account of a female slave named Politoria, who, having been told that she was going to be sold to an ἐργάστιλλον (or to an ἐργαστήριον?), which could be a textile workshop –or perhaps a brothel (Alvar Nuño 2017: 55)–, decided to resort to magic in order that the deities controlled by the magician would disrupt her sale.

47. Leaving aside the discourses elaborated in the past by the various Marxist schools in which the resistance of slaves was framed within the class struggle theory, here we limit ourselves to mentioning three outstanding recent titles, such as those of Kamen (2011: 192-203), Bradley (2011: 362-384) or the general work of Hodkinson and Geary (2012). In this sense, Bradley himself (1994: 107-108) describes the famous story of «Androcles and the Lion» (Aul. Gel. V 14, 7) as a marvellous fiction that reflects the moral resistance of the slaves in their determination to escape from slavery.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of the current study was to reconstruct a reality about which there is very little information. As pointed out in the introduction, it is not particularly relevant to determine whether Pliny had sexual relations with his slaves. What is truly significant is that the reconstruction of the episode under analysis has led us to a much more important issue: that of the feelings of child slaves forced to provide sexual services for their masters[48]. Unlike the Greek adolescents involved in the paederastic relationships –who appear in a more safely structured social arrangement–, these boys were in a position of extreme vulnerability (Manwell 2007: 118). According to this hypothesis, the story of the magic barbers was a subtle hint from the children to stop their master from abusing them. However, Pliny ignored such an interpretation and preferred to understand that the boys would no longer have to cut their hair because he was going to be spared Domitian's cruelty. On the basis of the arguments presented throughout this article, this interpretation could be considered to be at least plausible. Readers are invited to make their own minds on the matter.

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48. However, Kudlien (1991: 49-52), through an analysis of oracular queries formulated by slaves and preserved in different sources (*Sortes Astrampsychi*; *Sortes Sangallenses*), shows that it was not uncommon for them to ask about the character of their masters, whether they were violent or sexually abusive (e. g. *Sortes Astrampsychi* 100).

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