

What Really Happened to Afranius Dexter? Pliny's Failed Master of *Epistle* 8.14

In an effort to understand a partial function of slavery in Pliny the Younger's letters, this paper explores the incident of Afranius Dexter's possible death at the hands of his freedmen, inspired by previous close literary readings of other historical works, as with Cicero's letters (Gunderson 2007). In his letters, Pliny mentions two specific accounts of master-murder, that of Larcus Macedo around 103/104 CE in 3.14 and that of Afranius Dexter, a consul, in 105 CE in 8.14. In 3.14, Pliny moralizes the death of Larcus Macedo through blaming his personality as a *dominus* as the reason why they murdered him, which illustrates the fear that exists between a slave owner and his slave (McKeown 2007). Later within his letter collection, Pliny discusses the case of Afranius Dexter in 8.14. His cause of his death is uncertain; however, there is a very real possibility of it being a murder caused by his freedmen, thus drawing a comparison between this letter and the explicit depiction of master-murder in 3.14 and their editorial parallelism (Bodel 2015). Pliny's major concern in 8.14 is a legal one: what punishment must the freedmen of Afranius Dexter endure in the case of their former master's death. Therefore, I argue that through a close literary reading of this letter, and with the moralizing and fear discussed in 3.14 in mind, the historical case of what happened to Afranius Dexter is elucidated by Pliny's description regarding the aforementioned problem of the freedmen's judicial sentence. There are three possible options regarding the manner of Afranius' death: whether he committed suicide alone, was assisted by his freedmen in such a suicide, or was unjustly murdered by them, but notably Pliny leaves this as a marked absence in his letter, refusing to directly state his opinion on why and how the consul died. Nevertheless, this paper shows that Pliny's deliberate word choices in his letter moralizes Afranius Dexter in his possible death at the hands of his freedmen through their possible punishments, and in turn this showcases Pliny's direct opinion on how Afranius died. Sequentially, this elucidates the broader viewpoint that elite *domini* such as Pliny hold towards their slaves and freedmen, specifically one that is karmic yet fearful.

Works Cited

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