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What has become of Damas? The invisible immigrants of the First Empire between exclusion and assimilation.

The *Cena Trimalchionis* (Petronius Arbiter, *Satyricon*, chs. 26-78), a literary piece of uneasy categorization and already studied in many areas of interest and from many points of view (it is enough referring to VANNINI 2007), keeps evidence of the social category of the freedmen, and in particular of their peculiar linguistic usage, as a kind of minimal “material trace” otherwise lost in the folds of History, which condemned it to oblivion by stigmatizing it as incorrect and rule-breaker. Drawing on also the Uniformitarian Principle (“we do not expect that the factors which regulate the linguistic alteration nowadays are basically different as yesterday”, following the authoritative words of GIACALONE RAMAT 2000: 60 with reference to Labov’s statement saying “the use of the present to explain the past”), that validates the application of current synchronic mechanisms to ancient socio-linguistic contexts (as it is well-proposed by GALAVERNA 2008-09 and 2011), even though reconstructed in a more fragmentary way, the case of Petronius’ freedmen is typical of the permanent mechanism that regulates the relationship of integration/clash between emerging groups and ruling classes, in those relational dynamics in which the most illustrious language (in this case, Latin) plays the main role of L1 for native speakers or people belonging to the ruling class only, while it acts as L2 for foreigners or subordinates. Just as, in the modern history, the language is a preferential instrument in the handling of power, letting or avoiding the participation and thus the socio-cultural integration of the members of a political community (ZANTEDESCHI 2010: 159), in the ancient times as described by Petronius the issues about integration, in which are involved resident strangers or even rising humble classes only, seem to prefer the linguistic perspective as a ground for a contrastive interaction that clearly marks the border between the freedmen and the elites to which they would strive for. And, then as now, the language of the powerless people, and more

generally speaking their social action, leaves space to the language of powerful people.