

Stoic Philosophy: the master-slave  
relationship  
*Seneca, Epistles to Lucilius (Letter  
47)*

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HUM101

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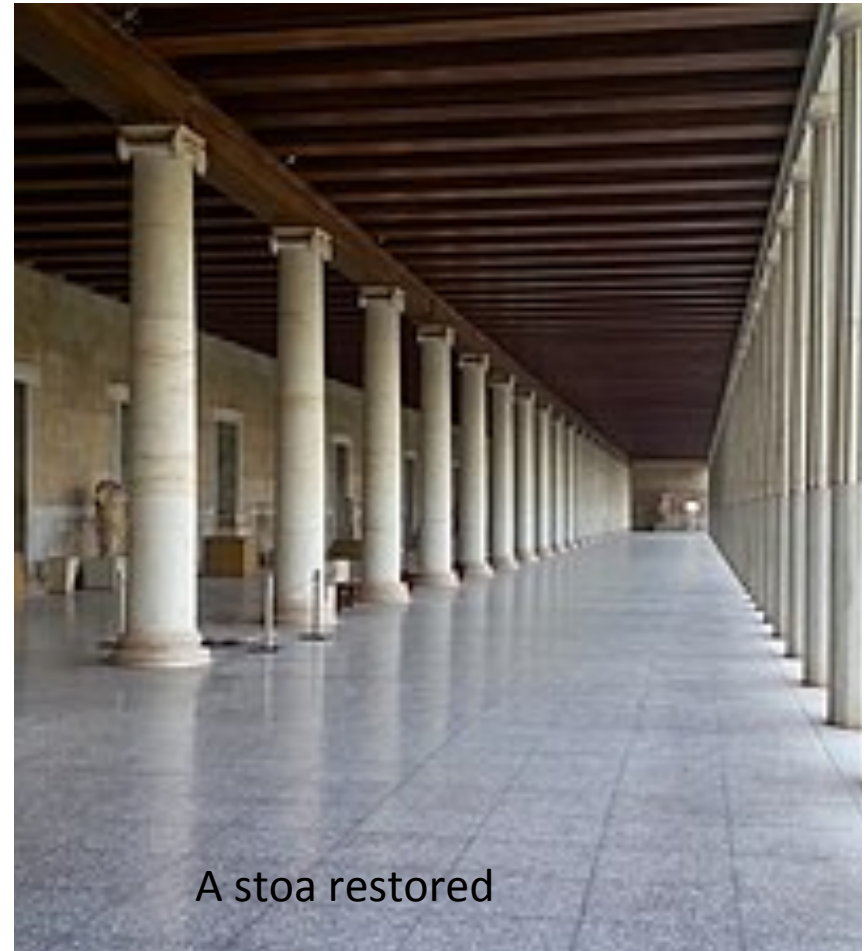
**Lucius Annaeus  
Seneca (4/1  
BCE?-65 CE)**

Roman statesman  
and lawyer, a stoic  
philosopher and a  
dramatist;  
A wealthy slave  
owner.



# Stoicism: From Stoa

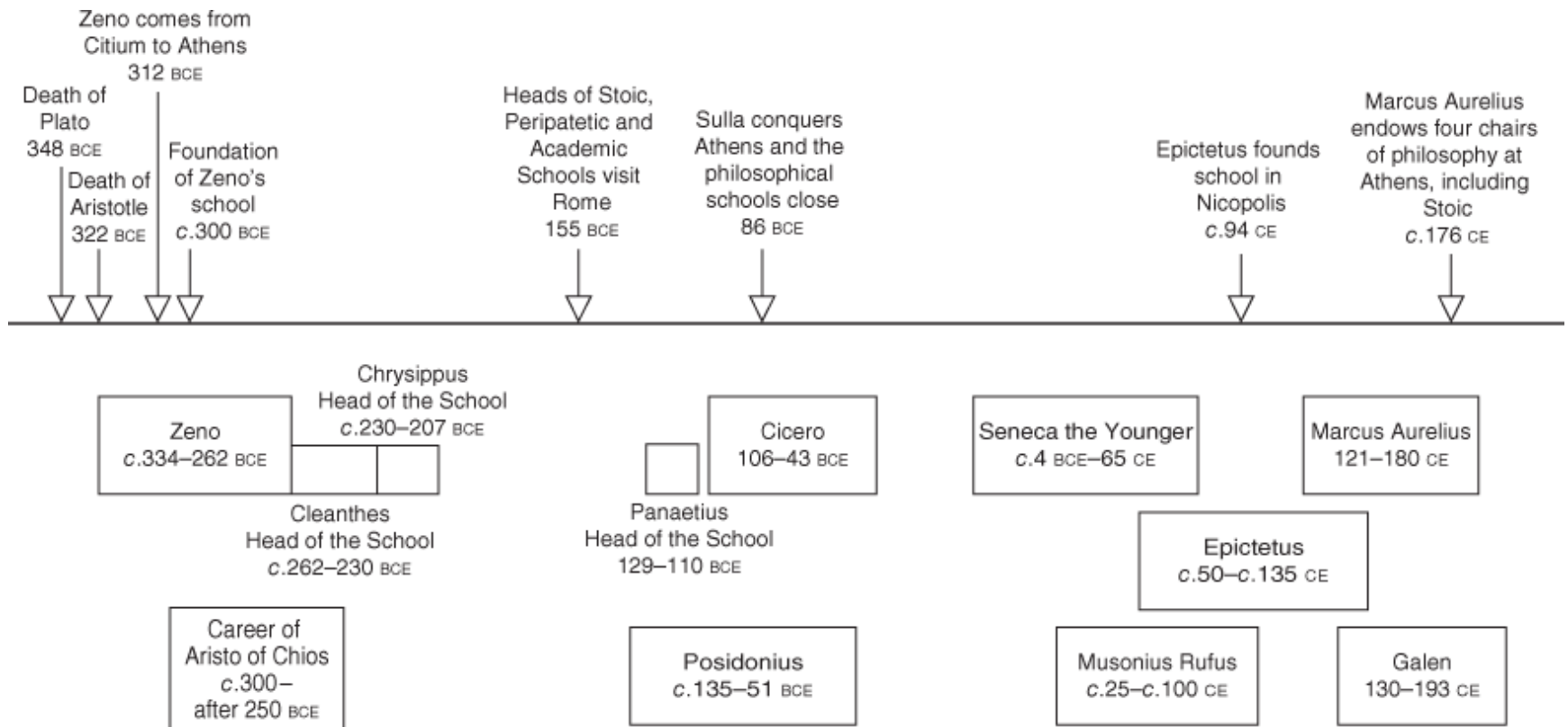
- Greek Stoic school  
(Hellenistic period):  
Zeno of Citium (335-263 BCE)-  
taught at Athens in a well-  
known *stoa* (hence stoicism).  
Cleanthes (331-232 BCE)  
Chrysippus (280-207 BCE)
- Roman stoics:  
Seneca (4? BCE-65 CE)  
Epictetus (freed slave)  
(50-135 CE)  
Marcus Aurelius (Roman  
emperor, 161-180 CE)



A stoa restored

# Timeline of the history of stoicism

(Brad Inwood, *Stoicism: A very short introduction*)



# Stoic philosophy: closer to wisdom, behavior vs. doctrine

- Stoic philosophy:
- Eudaimonia (happiness): present
- Freedom from the passions
- Therapeutic process (ie purging emotions based on external circumstances)
- Supremacy of reason over sentiments
- Nature has an order and a plan
- Health, wealth and pleasure do not bring virtue.
  
- Paradox: No “wise” stoic: distant ideal or progress towards this ideal.

Epicurean philosophy:  
Pleasure key to happiness

Peripatetic School (Aristotle):  
Virtue key to happiness but under favorable circumstances.

Stoic philosophy: virtue key to happiness regardless circumstances.

# The Julio-Claudian dynasty

- 16 BCE-14 CE: Augustus
- 14-37 Tiberius
- 37-41 Caligula
- 41-54 Claudius
- **54-68 Nero**

# Rhetoric vs. philosophy

## **Seneca's father**

Equestrian family of Corduba,  
(Roman province of Spain)

Imperial procurator, a master  
of rhetoric, public speech and  
debates.

## **Seneca the younger**

Master of rhetoric: writes  
Nero's speeches

Philosophy: human condition

Pythagorean:  
(metempsychosis) vegetarian

37 Quaestor (Senate)

41-49 exile in Corsica

# Tutor and Political advisor of Nero

- 49 returned to Rome to tutor Nero
- 54 Nero becomes emperor; Seneca is one of his “friends”, his political advisor.
- Murder of Agrippina by Nero
- 62 and 64 Seneca asks to leave his position; rejected by Nero;
- 62 retired from public life (Natural philosophy; letter to Lucilius)
- 65 Accused of attempting murder of Nero; on the order of Nero, Seneca commits suicide.

**Nero and Seneca**



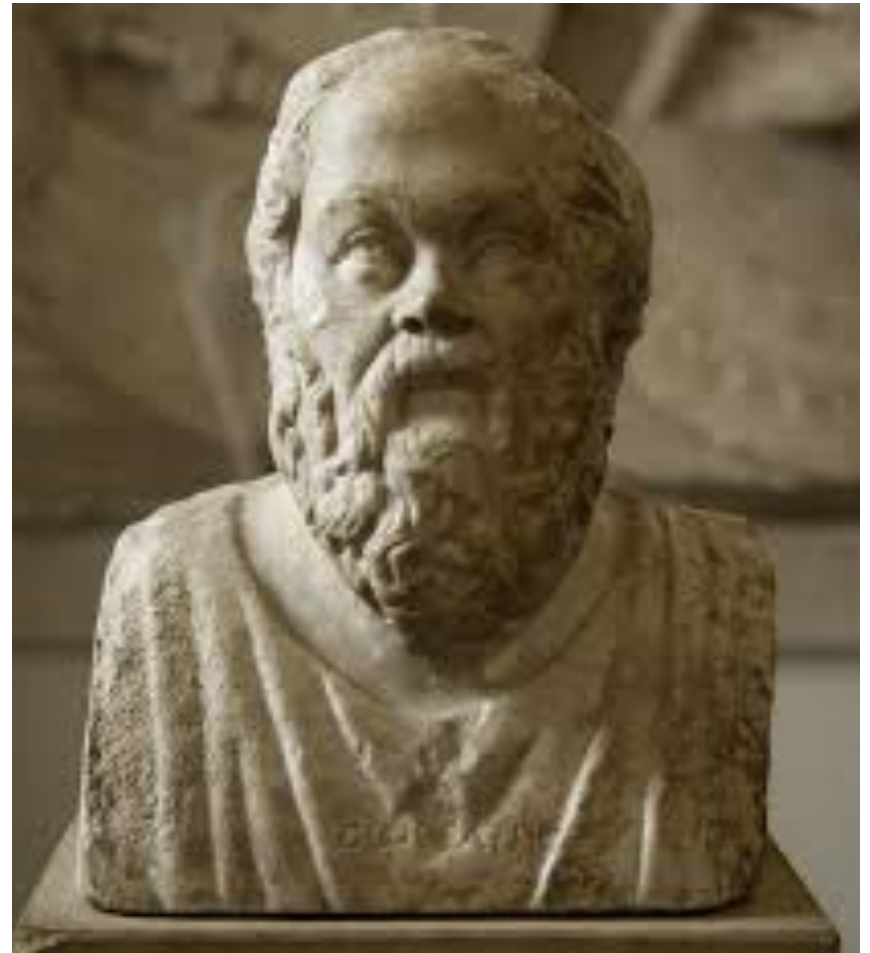
**Seneca's stoic death  
depicted by Rubens**

Letter 8 "I am  
writing for future  
generations,  
writing down ideas  
that might be  
valuable to them."



# Seneca and Socrates

Pergamon museum, Berlin



# Letters to Lucilius (47/124)

- To Gaius Lucilius Iunior, written after his retirement from public affairs, few years before his death (c. 62-65)

Letters: intimacy

- A mental exercise to become wise
- Didactic: to teach Lucilius how to endorse Stoicism

# Philosophy: a lifestyle

- Philosophy: a matter of sect and a way of life
- Letters: living a happy and moral life= to reach wisdom
- Contradiction? Hypocrisy? Seneca extremely wealthy and a slave owner

# What is a slave?

- “they’re slaves” people say. No.
- “they’re human beings”
- “they share the same roof as ourselves”
- “they’re friends, humble friends.”
- **“They’re our fellow-slaves, if you once reflect that fortune has as much power over us as over them.”**

# Domestic slaves



# Current conventions: Turning the slave into an enemy

- The master would dine surrounded by his slaves who can not either eat or speak;
- If they cannot utter a sound and talk to their master, “they talk about him behind his back”.  
(90-91)
- Including giving evidence against his master in court

# Slaves as enemies

“ ‘You’ve as many enemies as you’re slaves’. They are not our enemies when we acquire them; we make them so.” (91)

“we Romans are exceptionally arrogant, harsh and insulting.” (93)

Vs. older days: conversation, loyalty. (91)

“Household as a miniature Republic” (94)

# Inhuman treatment of the slaves

- Beasts of burden vs. human beings
- Sexual slaves: “his sleepless nights is divided between his master’s drunkenness and sexual pleasures, boy at the table, man in the bedroom. “(92)

# Commonality of the master and the slave

- “same stock as yourself.. Same good sky above him..” (93)
- Human beings

# Callistus

- “Yet have a look at the number of masters he has from the ranks of his very slaves.”
- Ex. of Gaius Julius Callistus, purchased by Caligula and freed and among Caligula's most powerful advisors; large wealth under Claudius.
- Reversal of the patron-client relationship
- Reversal of fortune: Hecuba, Plato (93)

# How to be a stoic master?

- “treat your inferiors in the way in which you would like to be treated by your own superiors.” (93)
- Friendship: slaves' characters rather than job. (94)
- Love: master should be loved rather feared (95)
- “he may have the spirit of a free man.” (95)

# slave by status & self-imposed state of slavery

“Show me a man who isn’t a slave; one is a slave to sex, another to money, another to ambition; all are slaves to hope or fear.”

“And there’s no state of slavery more disgraceful than one which is self-imposed.” (95)

# True freedom is internal freedom

- Seneca does not argue against the institution of slavery but for a dignified humanitarian treatment of the slaves (no beating, no sexual tools);
- Seneca holds internal freedom to be the true freedom.

# Can there be good slave owners?

**12 years a slave (2013)**



**Gone with the wind (1939)**



# Questions

- Can there be friendship between the master and the slave if one is free and the other not?
- Do you think Seneca has a different argument about friendship than Aristotle?