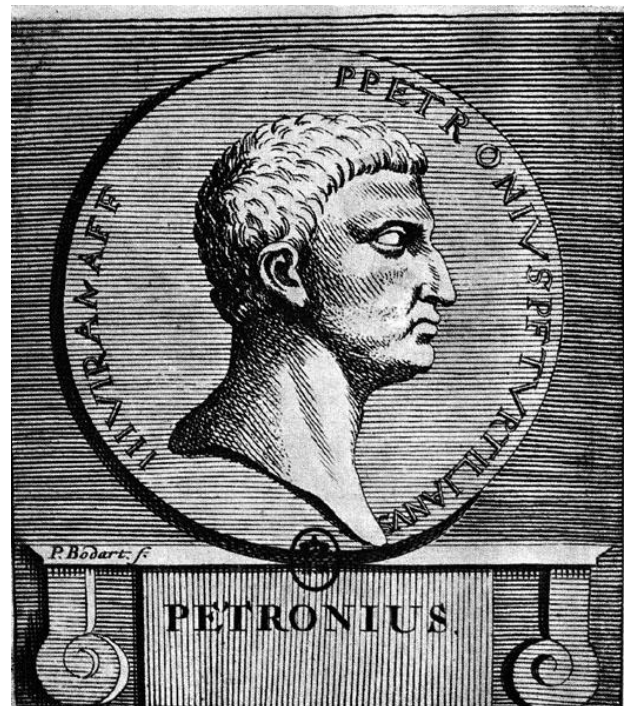


# Petronius Arbiter

Gaius Petronius Arbiter (c. 27 – 66 AD) was a Roman courtier during the reign of Nero. He is generally believed to be the author of the *Satyricon*, a satirical novel believed to have been written during the Neronian era.

Tacitus, Plutarch and Pliny the Elder describe Petronius as the "elegantiae arbiter" (also phrased "arbiter elegantiarum"), "judge of elegance" in the court of the emperor Nero. He served as consul in the 62 AD. Later, he became a member of the senatorial class who devoted themselves to a life of pleasure, whose relationship to Nero was apparently akin to that of a fashion advisor.



None of the ancient sources give any further detail about his life, or mention that he was a writer. However a medieval manuscript, written around 1450, of the *Satyricon* credited a "Titus Petronius" as the author of the original work. Traditionally this reference is linked with Petronius Arbiter, since the novel appears to have been written or at least set during his lifetime. The link, however, remains speculative and disputed.

Petronius' development of his characters in the *Satyricon*, namely Trimalchio, transcends the traditional style of writing of ancient literature. In the literature written during Petronius' life the emphasis was always on the typical considerations of plot, which had been laid down by classical rules. The character, which was hardly known in ancient literature, was secondary. Petronius goes beyond these literary limitations in his exact portrayals of detailed speech, behavior, surroundings, and appearance of the characters.

Another literary device Petronius employs in his novel is a collection of specific allusions. The allusions to certain people and events are evidence that the *Satyricon* was written during Nero's time. These also suggest that it was aimed at a contemporary audience in which a part consisted of Nero's courtiers and even Nero himself.

The message Petronius tries to convey in his work is far from moral and does not

intend to produce reform, but is written above all to entertain and should be considered artistically. As the title implies the Satyricon is a satire, specifically a Menippean satire, in which Petronius satirizes nearly anything, using his impeccable taste as the only standard. It is speculated that Petronius' depiction of Trimalchio mirrors that of Nero. Although we never know the author's own opinion, we see the opinions of the characters in the story and how Encolpius criticizes Trimalchio.

Petronius' high position soon made him the object of envy for those around him. Having attracted the jealousy of Tigellinus, the commander of the emperor's guard, he was accused of treason. He was arrested at Cumae in 65 AD but did not wait for a sentence. Instead he chose to take his own life.