

Reintegrating the Local Elites: The Emergence of the Notables

Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner, Heidelberg

The traditional picture of the municipal elites on the Later Roman Empire is one of disintegration in legal, functional, and, above all, social terms: Within the local context, it is held that elites were divided into a socially and economically powerful group of *honorati* abstinent from municipal administration and an increasingly impoverished curial order who had to shoulder the civic burdens. And on a supra-municipal level, legal rules and the shrinking wealth of the curial order increasingly widened the gap between them and the imperial aristocracy, prevented upward social mobility, and created social stratification where formerly had been a much more homogeneous group. Both developments are traditionally regarded as a major factor in the decline of the cities. This view has, however, been challenged in recent decades by scholars who argue against a general economic decline of the curial order from the fourth through the sixth century. The paper takes up that challenge and further investigates the question of a social and functional disintegration among the local elites and its consequences for the history of the Late Roman city. In a first step, it argues, on the basis of a broad variety of legal, papyrological, and archaeological evidence, against Liebeschuetz' view that the transition from the curial government to that of a looser assembly of local grandees, the notables, led to a lack of control and accountability in municipal administration. From a functionalist point of view it seems that the emergence of the notables was merely a change in the institutional framework of the city administration. In a second step the paper tries to demonstrate that continuity prevailed over disintegration also in the more informal aspects of aristocratic commitment to the polis: Through euergetism, patronage and honourable services to their cities, *honorati* continued to leave their mark on municipal life and situated themselves fully in the tradition of the competitive elite culture that had been the basis of municipal life in the Mediterranean for centuries. This remains true even if, in comparison to the second and third centuries, euergetism changed its objects and means and may have lost in importance to other ways of representation. In the third and final section an answer is sought to the question why the shift from the *curiae* to the notables take place at all, if it is true that there is much more continuity than it had been assumed so far. The answer proposed here is that the governmental tendency to transfer certain municipal functions like the administration of justice from decurions to *honorati* from the 360s onwards – which had nothing to do with an economic or social decline of the *curiae* – created a gap between the social power of the *honorati* and the legitimate authority of the curial officers that threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the latter and the maintenance of public order. It was, therefore, in the common interest of all parties involved to establish an institutional base for the political and administrative issues that integrated both groups, *curiales* and *honorati*. This institutional base is what we encounter as the notables from the early fifth century onwards. Once such platforms became regular and frequent in the cities, the originally limited number of administrative tasks they dealt with was gradually expanded in scope to include ever more aspects of municipal government, whether out of local needs or by imperial demand. The *curia* as an institution thereby gradually declined in importance and ultimately disappeared.

General Bibliography

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