

Aristocratic Competition and Refusal of Office in Late-Antique Rome

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In the correspondence of the late fourth-century senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, late Roman aristocrats proclaim a preference for the pleasures of private life over the toils of politics. This paper seeks to explore the meaning of this ideology of refusal of office.

The social environment in which Roman aristocrats of the fourth century AD lived was in at least one significant respect different from that of the senatorial aristocracy of the early empire: Rome no longer was the residence of an emperor. As long as emperors resided in Rome, they monopolised the most important fields of aristocratic self-display, such as large-scale spectacles, monumental building and public statuary. By curbing aristocratic competition, emperors sought to prevent the emergence of any rival to their rule.

By contrast, in late antiquity, when emperors no longer resided in Rome, such restrictions fell away. Aristocrats again publicly competed for pre-eminence by displaying their civic achievements in public monuments, and through bankrupting investments in civic munificence and spectacles. But not all were able to finance the lavish munificence now expected from a proper aristocrat, nor to attain the magistracies which gave their holders opportunities for public self-display. Concerns about the corrosive effects of aristocratic ambition on the cohesion of Roman society are expressed in several contemporary texts, ranging from the historian Ammianus Marcellinus through Symmachus' dispatches as urban prefect to the imperial legislation contained in the *Codex Theodosianus*.

The claimed reluctance of late Roman nobles to hold office is best seen as a response to such anxieties about the cohesion of aristocratic society. In the same way as rich office holders were expected not to show off their wealth through lavish games or through the construction of new public buildings, so members of Rome's most prominent families also were not to ostentatiously display their success in the holding of public office. Significantly, precisely the most politically successful nobles – who in other contemporary texts were denounced for their insatiable ambition – fashioned themselves as unwilling office-holders. By claiming to hold office against their will, successful aristocrats attempted to maintain the unity of an aristocratic society endangered by increased competitive tensions.

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