

Libraries and Euergetism – Discussion of Theories and Methodology

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Studies of public munificence in the Roman Empire have often explained wealthy donations to the citizen body as an exchange of gifts for honors: wealthy donors gave their communities public buildings, games, or other gifts in return for prestige.¹ The donation of public libraries, however, presents a conundrum: with only a relatively small portion of the population able to read the books they housed,² libraries were an act of munificence that was lost on most people. How then can we explain the tremendous outlay of funds for such a gift, if sponsors could expect few accolades in return? I believe that Arjan Zuiderhoek's study of euergetism, presented in his 2009 book *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire: Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor*, offers an explanation. This paper will set out the basic principles of Zuiderhoek's theory, and then discuss its relevance to libraries. Finally, it will look at the rival explanation of euergetism as an exchange of gifts for honours, and attempt to explain why Zuiderhoek's is the approach best suited for explaining this form of munificence.

Zuiderhoek's Theory of Euergetism

Zuiderhoek's theory explains the social function of euergetism (i.e., the public donation of very large gifts by elites to their communities) in Asia Minor during first two centuries AD. Though the exchange of gifts for honors is a key aspect of euergetism, Zuiderhoek explains that a more profound (and political) function underlays this exchange.³ At its root, euergetism served the dual purpose of preserving social harmony between elite and non-elite members of a community, while simultaneously

¹ For example: Salmon, 1968, pp. 88-89: "There was, indeed, keen competition ... to bestow benefactions on one's city. ... In some cases the local millionaires made their gifts because ... their vanity was flattered by the votes of thanks, the honorific statutes, etc., with which they were rewarded." Or Lomas, 2003, p. 41: Local elites engaged in munificent building "...as a means of maintaining the position of their cities in the local hierarchy and of ensuring their own prominence by initiating and/or paying for these projects."

² Harris, 1989, p. 22: "The likely overall illiteracy level of the Roman Empire under the principate is almost certain to have been above 90%."

³ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 9 and p. 11.

legitimizing the power and status of the elites within that community.⁴ Roman rule in Asia Minor brought greater discrepancies in wealth between elites and non-elites, and a more pronounced oligarchisation than seen previously in this area.⁵ This change in social structure created the potential for social discord, and even open conflict on a few occasions, between elites and non-elites.⁶ To preserve social harmony, sufficiently wealthy elites placated lower-class citizens through a variety of gifts to the community. Most often they were public buildings such as baths, temples, or theatres, but also included games, festivals, and the distribution of grain or money.⁷ These gifts gave the lower classes at least the perception that they were also sharing in the new wealth that had enriched certain members of their community, while also cultivating a sense of civic unity by providing the amenities befitting a Greco-Roman citizen, as Zuiderhoek explains: "... the ideal of the citizen community and the entitlements inherent in citizenship needed somehow to be acknowledged and find public recognition. This is precisely what the elite tried to do, and what the non-elite citizenry expected elite citizens to do, by means of their gift-giving to the citizen community."⁸ In this way, gifts acknowledged non-elites as worthy to share in the benefits of their community's citizenship, thus helping to preserve social stability, even as society became more hierarchical, and wealth more concentrated among fewer people.

This giving and accepting of public gifts simultaneously legitimised the status and political power of elites. Munificence came with the expectation that donors would receive honors for their gifts to the community, such as statues, public acknowledgment ceremonies, and inscriptions (our most important source of evidence for euergetism).⁹ It is crucial to understand that the language found in these inscriptions is not simply formulaic praise, but rather part a living discourse: though inscriptional

⁴ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 9.

⁵ Zuiderhoek, 2009, pp. 53-56 (greater wealth among elites) and pp. 60-66 (oligarchisation).

⁶ Zuiderhoek, 2009, pp. 66-70.

⁷ Zuiderhoek, 2009, pp. 76-77.

⁸ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 150.

⁹ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 7.

language may well have been written by elites to highlight their own accomplishments, ancestors and generosity (and hence fitness to lead their communities), non-elite citizens also used the same language to mark these elites as possessing a higher level of civic virtue than other citizens.¹⁰ In effect, public acknowledgement of elite donors as good citizens was also tacit acknowledgement of their status and fitness to lead their communities. "The 'good man' attracts prestige because of his usefulness to the community. ... A man without resources cannot be useful; hence he cannot be good."¹¹ As good citizens, then, the munificent elite earned praise, status and prestige—and legitimation of their status and power.

Euergetism and Public Libraries

Although his focus is Asia Minor, Zuiderhoek suggests that his theory could also apply to other areas of the Roman Empire.¹² Because my thesis will also focus on a particular type of elite munificence that was popular during the same timeframe Zuiderhoek focuses on, I believe his theory can indeed provide an explanation for elite donations of public libraries.

Just as euergetism built unity between elites and non-elites by providing the amenities befitting a Greco-Roman citizen, libraries were an elite-to-elite gift that cultivated a sense of belonging to a specific class, thus reducing envy among the less-wealthy elite. Because the level of literacy necessary to read the books in a public library was limited to those wealthy enough to afford an elite education,¹³ donors were acknowledging the rarified status of their less-wealthy peers, and including them small circle that could appreciate literature (an image many library donors were at pains to project), which

¹⁰ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 129.

¹¹ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 130.

¹² Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 1

¹³ Harris, 1989, p. 259, argues that less than a quarter of the population of Italy (including Rome itself) was literate during the principate. In the western provinces, he estimates only 5% to 10% of the population was literate (p. 272). In the Greek east under the Roman empire, wealthy men were still expected to be able to read and write (p. 330), but illiteracy was the general rule among artisans and lower classes (p. 278).

separated elites from non-elites.¹⁴ In this way, the richest members of the elite could reduce envy and foster harmony within their class.

By accepting libraries, less wealthy elites also legitimated the higher status of their wealthier peers. These less wealthy elites typically joined the governing class because high mortality rates in antiquity made it necessary to fill political offices with citizens who met the property qualifications.¹⁵ Old-guard elites, however, jealously guarded their own positions: "As a group, the elite was forced to take in newcomers, but as individuals, elite members tried to differentiate themselves as sharply as possible from potential new recruits."¹⁶ With most sub-elites lacking the level of literacy necessary to use their collections, libraries must have appealed only to the highly educated.¹⁷ Such a gift might well have been seen as snub to non-elites. But donors who had already made donations that benefitted the lower classes could also offer libraries to the upper classes: only they could afford to give a gift that would appeal specifically to fellow (though less wealthy) elites, without any fear that their gift would leave non-elite citizens asking, "What about us?" Thus libraries could serve both to build cohesion (as a gift that acknowledged lesser elites as educated and able to appreciate literature and thus worthy of joining elite society), but also emphasize the superior status of those who donated them (as the only people able to afford both the financial and social costs of elite-to-elite munificence).

Refuting the Gifts for Honors Interpretation

The other main school of thought explains libraries as a gift that was meant to showcase the donors' wealth and generosity in order to win them prestige. Though this understanding certainly overlaps Zuiderhoek's theory, it falls short because it fails to recognize libraries' uniquely literary

¹⁴ See, for example, the discussion of Celsus' library in König, 2012, p. 6.

¹⁵ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 134-135.

¹⁶ Zuiderhoek, 2009, p. 138, Lomas, 2003, p. 41

¹⁷ Harris, 1989, p. 273.

character. Matthew Nichols, for example, argues that the library of Celsus "... was intended to function as a sort of billboard proclaiming the family's virtues (and promoting their standing) in one of the busiest parts of the city."¹⁸ The library of Timgad was "... designed to impress townspeople and visitors, passers-by and readers alike."¹⁹ It is this public aspect in particular that most concerns Nichols: libraries, he emphasizes, should not be seen as closed and exclusive buildings, visited only by readers. Rather, they were typically built in public areas, decorated with art, and often used to host recitations, meetings, and other public functions, so even illiterates would find some appeal in them.²⁰ Publicity for the donors was so important that it over-rode the library's role in preserving books: "Given the value of the book collections and the measures that library architects took to protect and preserve them, the decision to expose the buildings and their contents to the public gaze came at a cost ... prominent display seems to have won out over discreet protection of the books."²¹ So, according to this line of reasoning, the key to understanding elites donations of libraries is found in their highly visible and public nature: without this, libraries would not serve to commemorate their donors.

This theory, however, is problematic because it fails to explain the key difference between libraries and other forms of munificent building: the book collections. Elites could build other structures that accomplished every function Nichols attributes to libraries: temples, basilicas, theatres, etc. were often used as meeting places, hosted recitations and other public entertainments, were decorated with art, and of course, all served to earn their donors public esteem. Nichols is absolutely right that libraries were designed to be as noticeable as possible, and that more sedate surroundings would be preferable for the purpose of preserving books. However, the conspicuous and grandiose nature of libraries is better explained by the social exchange theory that Zuiderhoek outlines. In order for lower elites to

¹⁸ Nichols, 2013, p. 269.

¹⁹ Nichols, 2013, p. 269.

²⁰ Nichols, 2013, p. 264-265 and again on p. 275-276.

²¹ Nichols, 2013, p. 264-265. Zuiderhoek discusses this position on pp. 113-114 of his book. Because they deal with euergetism generally, and not libraries specifically, I won't rehash Zuiderhoek's arguments here.

accept the gift of the higher elites, the library must be at least as grandiose as any other form of munificence. An unadorned and obscure warehouse, no matter how many books it contained, would hardly tell lower members of the elite class, "You are one of us." To communicate the idea of inclusion among the elite, a library has to be at least as beautiful and as visible as any other gift used to underscore the inclusion of sub-elites in the citizen body. Nor would donors want to hide their generosity: to do so would suggest that they did not actually have a surplus of goodwill from the lower classes. Only by conspicuously displaying their gift could donors demonstrate that they enjoyed an abundance of public esteem, and thereby underscore their family's higher status among elites.

Conclusion

As a form of munificence, libraries were a unique gift because they had a literary dimension that was not found in other buildings. Given all the available building options that donors had, the decision to offer the community the gift of a library requires an explanation. Whatever other function they filled in Roman society, it was their role as a place of books that made them unique, and which made them a valuable form of euergetism. For without their books, libraries simply wouldn't be libraries, and they wouldn't have their specific appeal to the educated elites of a community. Nor would they serve to specifically recognize the status of those elites as being part of a class separate from and above others. Moreover, libraries were also an effective form of munificence for the more affluent and established elites to demonstrate their superiority to new, and less wealthy, members of their class. These dynamics, entirely missing from the standard view of euergetism as a simple exchange of gifts for honors, become clear when understood from Zuiderhoek's theory of euergetism.

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