

Libraries and Euergetism during the Principate

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Despite low literacy rates, Romans living under the Principate enjoyed access to a surprisingly large number of public libraries—twenty-six in Rome by the fourth century AD, plus others in the provinces. As institutions typically built at private expense and donated to the public, they're exactly like other forms of munificence, such as baths and gymnasia, that won prestige for their donors. So it is puzzling that emperors and aristocrats would expend their wealth on libraries, when comparatively few people would be literate enough to appreciate them. Even allowing for their use as meeting places for public readings or discussions, libraries were primarily repositories for literary works that relatively few people were able to read. As a form of public munificence, libraries were less likely to earn their sponsors as much recognition as other building projects. Why, then, did emperors and wealthy Romans sponsor libraries?

This dissertation will survey the scholarly literature on public libraries in the Roman Empire, focusing on the high level of literacy required to make use of their collections. It will then situate the discussion within scholarly studies of euergetism, which view munificence as an exchange of gifts from the wealthy for honors from the public. Unlike most such acts, however, the donation of public libraries was aimed at enhancing the donors' standing among other elites, not the wider population. In a society where books were a labour-intensive and comparatively scarce commodity, public libraries were a valuable resource for the highly literate minority. Accordingly, the wealthy few who could sponsor libraries, I will argue, did so to win prestige among their peers.

The prestige earned from elite-to-elite donations helped solidify the donors' standing in society. For emperors, sponsoring public libraries showed that they shared a respect for literature with that portion of the population able to appreciate it. Not coincidentally, this was the same strata of society that supplied the literate magistrates and bureaucrats who were indispensable for imperial rule. For aristocrats, this form of euergetism was one form of politically acceptable competition with other elites, since republican-style competition for public office was no longer possible under the empire. For both emperors and aristocrats, sponsoring libraries demonstrated their patronage of the literary arts, underscoring their adherence to the rarefied culture of upper class Greco-Romans, and thus further legitimating their own status.

With few people literate enough to appreciate the works housed in public libraries, emperors and aristocrats must have known that sponsoring such institutions would win them little appreciation from the general population. Nonetheless, they must have considered this form of euergetism worth the expense. For, despite their high cost and their limited appeal beyond the educated elite, public libraries must have been uniquely valuable to those who could appreciate them. For this reason, libraries would have been a very effective means for their sponsors to win prestige among their peers.

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