

Working the system: From the *familia publica* to the *apparitores* in the Roman empire

The topic of social and economic mobility among the lowest strata of Roman society continues to fascinate scholars of Roman social history. Families whose origin lain in slavery occupy a prominent place in this research. One of the main indicators of a formerly enslaved family's successful trajectory that have captured scholars' attention is the placement of a descendant in the council of decurions in towns around the Roman empire. This important step granted to the fortunate families entry into the municipal aristocracy. The most remarkable cases are those in which a first-generation freeborn son of a freedman reached the decurionate. Such a feat is not necessarily rare in our evidence, but these cases often carry an outsized importance in discussions of social mobility. As impressive as such cases are, they are unlikely to represent the norm (cf. Mouritsen 2011). What is more, the top-down perspective of seeking freedmen's descendants only among the *ordo* leaves many gaps in our picture of the impact of freedmen's families on local power structures and the avenues they pursued.

One means of fleshing out this picture is to explore intermediate stages in the trajectory of freedmen's families. Some of this work has been done on their progression through the 'associative order' in Roman communities (e.g., Tran 2006; Verboven 2007). This paper proposes another fruitful avenue for inquiry into social mobility which seeks to track the incremental rise of freedmen's descendants from below. The focus is on the descendants of municipal freedmen who made what can be considered a lateral move by entering the ranks of the *apparitores* who supported the municipal administration. Municipal freedmen (*liberti publici*) had been owned and eventually manumitted by Roman towns, yet the high status and privileges many enjoyed while enslaved in their town's *familia publica* did not often translate into success after manumission (Easton 2024). But from a methodological standpoint, a consequence of their manumission by the town council—and not by a private patron – was their acquisition of a family name, the *gentilicium*, derived from the town's name (e.g., Ostiensis from Ostia). These rare *gentilicia* cohered among their descendants

and thus function as an effective tool for tracking a family's progress in inscriptions across multiple generations and sites.

The tasks which municipal freedmen had performed for their town naturally put them in proximity to the various apparitorial staff members detailed in epigraphic evidence as well as the municipal law codes such as the *Lex Irnitana* (Chh. 19-20, 73) and *Lex Coloniae Genetivae Iuliae* (Ch. 62) from Baetica. The freedmen's connections to apparitors like scribes, lictors, and messengers and to the decurions who made the appointments may have eased the recruitment of their sons and grandsons into the staff. This service brought a respectable salary, status, and more meaningful contact with the elite, and it also opened additional paths of upward mobility. I have thus far identified four cases which allow us to analyze this more gradual sort of social ascent. One example comes from the Umbrian town of Sentinum, where the freeborn son of a municipal freedman, named C. Sentinas Iustus, had risen to the apparitorial rank of public scribe (*scriba publicus*) by the time of his death at age twenty-four (*CIL XI 5760*). At the other end of the process of social mobility, a later Sentinas ascended to the decurionate and held the town's highest magistracy (*CIL XI 5761-62*).

The possibility of contributing freeborn descendants to the apparitorial ranks must have been a far more realistic short-term ambition for municipal freedmen than producing a member of the decurionate in the immediate generations after the family's ascent from slavery. While this sort of incremental upward progress may be less fascinating, it is surely a no less important piece toward understanding the processes behind social and economic mobility in the communities of the Roman empire.

Bibliography

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