

THE *HONESTIORES* AS FOUNDERS OF INSCRIPTIONS DEDICATED TO HERCULES

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ABSTRACT: In this article I analyse the epigraphic evidence for the involvement of representatives from the Roman upper classes (*honestiores*) in the cult of Hercules. The study of dedications by representatives of the two highest *ordines* leads us to the conclusion that senators and equites decided on the issue of religious inscriptions above all when the function performed by them was required. The deciding factor was in this instance the expectations of the environment in which the senatorial or equestrian official was active. Another perceptible force which could have influenced the decision concerning the issue of an inscription dedicated to Hercules was the prestigious nature of the centre of this god's cult, which gave the foundation appropriate propagandistic values. If representatives of the senatorial or equestrian ranks are featured among exhibitors of inscriptions dedicated to Hercules under circumstances different from those described above, these are standard 'new people' in the circle of the Roman social elite. It is significantly more difficult to determine the causes of epigraphic activity (or its absence) among representatives of the municipal elite. The analysis of dedications by members of this social stratum may give the impression that in some regions of the empire (above all in northern and central Italy, Africa and Dacia), there are particular factors which encouraged members of the *ordo decurionum* to exhibit inscriptions dedicated to Hercules, particularly in those centres where his cult enjoyed an especially long tradition and a significant role in local religious life. In this instance inscriptions dedicated to Hercules could have become an additional form of self-representation, especially for new members of the municipal elite.

In 1989, Werner Eck published an extensive article on the religiousness of the Roman imperial elite, which included members of the senatorial order and the *equites* performing public functions¹. The German historian tried to answer the question as to whether religious changes occurring during the early imperial period were also reflected in the religious life of this social group. Since literary

¹ Eck (1989) uses the term "soziopolitische Führungsschicht". Christ (1980: 218 f.) reads the term "Führungsschicht" in a completely different way. According to him, this group was comprised only of men who influenced Roman policies and laws; men who held the highest offices in the army and the imperial administration. Apart from the *princeps* himself and members of his *domus*, this elite group consisted, according to him, of consuls and equestrian prefects of the highest rank, senatorial and equestrian governors of provinces, members of the *consilium principis*, particularly privileged lawyers, and under some emperors (especially Claudius and Nero), the most influential imperial freedmen. On the stratification of the Roman social elite see also Wojciechowski 2005: 156.