

Arjan Zuiderhoek, *The Politics of Munificence in the Roman Empire. Citizens, Elites and Benefactors in Asia Minor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xvii + 186, figs. 11, tables 4. ISBN978-0-521-51930-4.

A central question posed by the scholarship on euergetism concerns why the wealthy inhabitants of cities of the Roman empire spent lavishly on gifts to their cities, and what they got, or hoped to get, in return. While many scholars have argued that euergetism played a key role in civic finance¹, P. Veyne supposed that euergetism was disinterested and an expression of the elite's social distance from the non-elite.² Others more recently have seen in euergetism a means for members of the elite to acquire symbolic capital, or social status and prestige.³ For Zuiderhoek, the author of this new monograph, the unprecedented proliferation of euergetism in Asia Minor during the Roman imperial period, especially in the 2nd c CE, was primarily and most importantly about politics. As civic elites grew richer, and the cities in which they operated were increasingly oligarchic, and economically and socially stratified, euergetism, or elite gift giving to the community, provided much needed social stability and legitimated elite rule. One cannot but agree that euergetism could and did have a political aspect, but does Z's view that it was, at its heart, about politics trump the other interpretations? Is it the best model for interpreting this variegated phenomenon? Indeed, the social status of *euergetai* ranged widely, as did their motives for a particular act of benefaction; even the recipients of the gifts were not uniformly the demos. While Z. has a lot of interesting things to say about many aspects of euergetism, the mono-causal view as a whole is not convincing to this reader. In different cities, in different parts of the Roman empire, among different actors and agents, euergetism did not have exactly the same function and effects.

Chapter One lays out definitions and the data which are key to the book. First, Z. precisely defines euergetism as a form of gift exchange between an elite benefactor and a city, or the demos. Simply put, a benefactor personally financed buildings, festivals, or distributions, etc., in exchange for the honour of a statue with inscribed base. For Z. the elite comprised the "official political elite" of the city, that is, members of council (*boule*) and their families, while the demos comprised the remaining free citizens. This definition of *euergetai* is too narrow since certainly by the 2nd century CE men of equestrian and senatorial rank, and women, increasingly acted as benefactors to cities, even ones which were not their hometowns (one thinks of G. Julius Celsus Polemeaenus in Ephesos). Such *euergetai* had horizons and spheres of activity that extended beyond the local, to the province and even to Rome itself. Z. also introduces in this chapter the evidentiary basis for the book, a body of 514 instances of euergetism recorded on

¹ E.g., F.F. Abbott and A.C. Johnson, *Municipal administration in the Roman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1926); T.R.S. Broughton, "Roman Asia Minor" in T. Frank ed., *An economic survey of Ancient Rome IV* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1938), 499–918; A.H.M. Jones, *The Greek City from Alexander to Justinian*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

² P. Veyne, *Bread and Circuses*, transl. Brian Pearce (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1990).

³ O. M. Van Nijf, *The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Roman East* (Amsterdam: J.J. Gieben, 1997).

inscriptions randomly selected from the published epigraphic corpora of Asia Minor. These form the basis of the quantitative analyses throughout the book. In Chapter one, based on this body of evidence, a series of tables charts the rise and fall of euergetism over the period and shows a peak in the 2nd c. CE, especially in the reign of Antoninus Pius, which will not surprise readers who are familiar with the history of the eastern Roman Empire.

In Chapters two and three, Z. takes direct aim at traditional economic explanations for the proliferation of euergetism in the Roman imperial period. According to the traditional view, the Roman imperial government gradually took control of most sources of civic revenue, leaving the cities to rely heavily on the purses of civic elites. Thus, euergetism came to be the key aspect of civic finance, with elite munificence financing the greater part of civic infrastructure and operations in the Roman imperial period. Z. opts for a two pronged quantitative counter-attack. First, Z aims to prove that the amount of elite expenditure on civic benefactions was very small and had little impact on the economic life of the city (Chapter 2). Second, Z. aims to prove that the amount of civic revenues from taxes was much greater than usually believed (Chapter 3). Using a sample of 44 mentions of expenditure on public building, Z. calculates the mode of elite expenditure on building as 10,000 denarii (table 2.1). This reader is not sufficiently convinced by the size or representativeness of the sample to conclude with Z. “that the sums in this sample offer a fairly representative picture of elite expenditure on munificence in the provinces” (p. 26). 45% of this already small sample derives from just two inscriptions which record the benefactions of a single individual, Opromoas of Rhodiapolis. Next, Z. attempts to determine the percentage of the annual aggregate elite income that was spent on building. This is based on a series of highly speculative figures: a model town of 25,000 inhabitants produced an average annual surplus of 3 million HS, of which the portion of aggregate elite income was 1–2 million HS per annum. The average amount of money needed by the town to build its infrastructure was 9 million HS, which amortised over 100 years would be 90,000 HS or 9,000 denarii per year, which is very close to the 10,000 denarii which was the mode of elite expenditure on building. Thus, Z. concludes only 5%, a very small sum, of aggregate elite annual income was spent on munificence related to building. (p. 27). These figures give the reader the illusion of precision although they are all speculative (which Z. readily admits). How much stock can we place in them as reflecting the lived reality in any town in the Roman Empire? The amount of elite funding of civic infrastructure, both maintenance and construction, must have varied widely from region to region, and from city to city depending on the resources at its disposal. To further diminish the economic impact of elite benefaction on cities, Z. argues that the majority of the civic elite did not have the means to finance an entire public building, but were only able to contribute either a portion of the cost, or architectural elements. There is plenty of evidence that the elites of eastern cities were highly stratified economically and socially. But Z.’s own database does not confirm that “big gifts ... must in reality have been comparatively rare.” Among his 514 total benefactions are 176 whole structures gifted by benefactors

(fig 5.2 and p. 80), while there 305 examples (fig. 5.3) of partial contributions to buildings. The number of partial gifts is larger than the number of whole buildings, but only by about 30%. It is difficult to conclude from these figures that big gifts were rare. Z. also asserts that there was little economic spin-off from elite munificence, such as the employment of unskilled labour, which injected more spending capacity into the economy (pp. 34–35). But to make this point, Z. underestimates the need for long and short term unskilled *and* skilled labour in ancient building projects. Although Janet Delaine's study of the baths of Caracalla in Rome deals with a complex that in its entirety was several times larger than most bath gymnasia complexes in the provinces, nonetheless, her figures regarding manpower are instructive.⁴ Excluding personnel involved in its decoration, Delaine calculated that the structure required an average of 6000 men working 12 hours a day for 300 days over 4 years, the largest group being skilled labourers. At peak periods she estimates that 10,000 men would be working. If we halve or even reduce by two thirds this number, the result is still an impressively large number of men employed, 3000 or 2000. If we take Z.'s average town of 25,000 this would mean the employment of 10-15% of population, and if we included only the male portion of the population, the figure would be much higher. During the 2nd c. CE building boom in cities of the eastern Roman Empire, demand for skilled and unskilled labour must have been high, driving up wages, and stimulating spending, even if only temporarily. Indeed, for certain periods, in certain places, for example, Ephesos in the 2nd century CE, one could argue that private benefaction, especially related to building must have had a substantial impact on the urban economy. But also the proliferation of new festivals, founded and endowed by *euergetai* in the eastern cities in the 2nd century surely also must have had an economic impact, attracting participants and spectators who needed food, lodging and souvenirs. Such festivals were often associated with markets, attracting sellers and buyers from the region.

Chapter three argues that cities did not need benefactors but could finance their infrastructure and expenditures without them. To this end Z. creates a budget of expenditures and income for his model city of 25,000 inhabitants. The figures presented here are again fragile because the numbers used are fictive. He argues that the amount of civic revenues was much higher than has been previously estimated with much deriving from civic taxes. Here Z. relies on the work of Schwarz, who notably admitted that the evidence for civic taxes is indeed sparse and scattered.⁵ While this reviewer agrees in general that civic revenues may have been larger than was previously thought, it is impossible at this point to prove that they were mostly sufficient to finance the needs of cities. With Z's arguments in Chapters 2 and 3, the pendulum swings away from the traditional, economic view where cities relied on benefactors for everything, to the view that euergetism hardly affected the economy of cities at all. Both views are too extreme.

⁴ J. Delaine, *The Baths of Caracalla: A study in the design, construction and economics of large scale building* (Portsmouth, R.I.: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1997), 175–194.

⁵ H. Schwarz, *Soll oder Haben? Die Finanzwirtschaft kleinasiastischer Städte in der römischen Kaiserzeit am Beispiel von Bithynien, Lykien und Ephesos, 29 v. Chr.-284 n. Chr.* (Bonn: Habelt, 2001).

It is important to keep in mind that cities and their economic capacities varied widely, as did the economic capacities of their *euergetai*. Z. is building a model of how euergetism might have functioned, but has it any basis in reality?

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 focus on demonstrating the essentially political nature of benefaction, that is, that euergetism was a key way that the elite maintained their control over cities. In these chapters Z. makes many useful observations. In Chapter 4, Z. argues that benefaction became increasingly necessary because during the imperial period the disparities in wealth and political power in cities grew. Riots and disruption were a real possibility, but rarely happened because benefaction acted as a salve upon the wound. Euergetism functioned as part of a moral economy, of unwritten reciprocal obligations wherein the non-elite accepted their lack of political voice and great disparities in wealth, as long as the elite held up their obligation to provide them “with all the amenities necessary for life as proper Greek (Greco-Roman) citizens.” (p. 70). In chapter 5 Z. shows that the gifts chosen reinforced the old Greek “collectivist ideal of the polis as a community of citizens” (p. 71), but at the same time legitimated the increasing hierarchisation of civic society under the Roman Empire. Gifts of whole buildings (58% of Z.’s sample), especially ones reinforcing collective identity (for example, temples), or sociability (for example, baths and theatres), demonstrated elite benefactors’ concern to provide the amenities required for living the idealised civic ‘good life’. While buildings served the whole citizen population equally, Z. argues that the various festival foundations created by *euergetai*, which often included differentiated distributions of small amounts of cash to various citizen groups, served to reinforce a hierarchy among these ‘status groups’. The members of the civic elite, especially the *boule*, receive the largest amount of cash and so are seen to be firmly at the top. But how to explain the fact that the hierarchies represented in foundation documents in different places are not the same? Regional differences, Z. suggests, but also the founder’s/*euergetes*’ predilections and preferences, and most importantly, negotiations between the benefactor with the *boule* and demos concerning the specific details of a benefaction. Thus the demos regained a little of its lost political voice, just enough to prevent them from growing restive.

In chapter 6 Z. aims to uncover how and to what extent euergetism legitimated existing relations of power relations and inequality in the Greek cities in the Roman era (p. 116). Z. reads the honorific inscriptions erected to *euergetai* by the *boule* and demos as a return for their generosity through a model of political legitimacy proposed by David Beetham.⁶ The language of the inscriptions demonstrates their strong ideological content, showing elite benefactors as embodying excellent *moral* qualities, like generosity and love of their city, which were acknowledged as central by both elite and non-elite, and served to legitimate the latter’s monopoly of politics and wealth. Z. also makes much of the ‘ancestor clauses’ which occur frequently in honorific inscriptions and detail the achievements of the similarly generous and accomplished ancestors of a benefactor.

⁶ D. Beetham, *The legitimation of power* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

These, it is argued, were a way for members of the elite, in the demographically unstable society Greco-Roman society, to show that they were not ‘new men’ and to underline a social continuity that was often fictional. From another perspective, and one that is perhaps more attuned to the Greco-Roman mindset, ancestor clauses may be viewed as commemorative devices, a way of preserving and keeping in mind the linked history of a family and a community. The *euergetes* and his family and the city would be nothing without each other.

To explain why the non-elite accepted elite political domination even though economic disparities were extreme, Z draws a distinction between the rural non-elite and the urban non-elite; it was the former who were most degraded by the elite’s increase in wealth and power based as it was on exploitation of land, while the latter were largely left unscathed by increasing economic disparities. Indeed, even very low status urban non-elite benefitted from the public gifts of *euergetai*. In this way the urban non-elite were freely willing to play the game from which they benefitted, acknowledging the elite through honorific inscriptions.

I would like to end by citing Zuiderhoek: “the thousands of honorific inscriptions for benefactors ... constitute the surest indication we have for the success of the euergetest system in heading off social and political conflict” (p. 107). Was euergetism, then, the opiate of the masses in the 2nd c CE? Perhaps the reason that there is so little evidence for class conflict is not due to the effects of euergetism, but because the people who inhabited Greco-Roman antiquity did not understand the hierarchies of their world through the perspective of political economy. Perhaps we mostly misread the honorific inscriptions: the overwrought language of praise is distasteful to most scholars, as are the sometimes very long ancestor clauses. Perhaps the thousands of inscriptions are less a manifestation of elite desire to keep power and plebeian desire to enjoy the material benefits of euergetism, than they are demonstrations of the mutual affection of the civic elite and the demos for their ‘sweetest fatherland.’

I enjoyed reading this book and believe it can be read with profit in its entirety (or chapter by chapter), by anyone who wants to understand an important aspect of Roman social and cultural history. However, readers should approach with caution the fictive numbers, and be aware that single explanations are unlikely to explain a complex phenomenon, euergetism, the specific manifestations of which varied according to place and time. That said, Zuiderhoek’s book is an important addition to the scholarship, and will be useful to students and scholars alike and should take its place on the shelves of anyone interested in the urban social history of the Roman Empire.

ANGELA KALINOWSKI
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN, SASKATOON, CANADA