

The Interplay between Power and Religion: Requisites and Requirements for a Career in the Eastern Roman Clergy

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The lower echelons of the Christian clergy, surprisingly, have thus far been widely neglected by social historians working on later Roman and early Byzantine society. Only crude assumptions have been drawn from individual, well-known bishops to the clergy as a whole. According to the *opinio communis*, the clergy of late antiquity was recruited from the curial classes. To be sure, many well documented individual bishops came from this social background. Men of curial origin were, in fact, banned from the clergy from a very early date, the first edict on the matter being that of Constantine enacted already in 320 (*CTh* 16.2.3), but numerous repetitions of this ban in later years [*CTh* 16.2.6 from 326; *CTh* 12.1.59 from 364; *CTh* 16.2.19 from 370; *CTh* 12.1.104 from 383; *CTh* 12.1.115 from 386; *CTh* 12.1.121 from 390; *CTh* 12.1.123 from 391; *CTh* 9.45.3 from 398; *CTh* 12.1.163 from 399] and concessions of amnesty and exceptions [*CTh* 16.2.9 from 349; *CTh* 12.1.115 from 386; *CTh* 12.1.121; *CTh* 12.1.163 from 399] have induced modern scholars to assume that the greater part of the clergy originated in these classes.

I would like to show, however, that representatives of this class held only the few, important positions at the top of the clerical hierarchy, and were found, depending on their grade of education, fortune, and worldly connections, in the upper echelons of prominent bishoprics or as heads of more or less important episcopal sees.

By re-reading the *Codex Theodosianus* and comparing it with our mainly documentary source material (inscriptions and papyri), I want reveal the major differences that existed between the recruiting basis for bishops and the lower echelons of the clergy. Priests, deacons, readers, and singers in the metropoleis and in the capital of the empire were of curial or cohortal background and constituted the recruiting basis for the future leaders of the church. Priests and deacons in the provincial towns, however, originated from the urban middle class, their fathers were small traders and artisans and they themselves often continued practicing their craft after their ordination. Only under highly unlikely circumstances did a man from these strata get the chance to be promoted to the bishop's throne. In the villages, the clergy was recruited from the leading families of the local peasant populace. The clergy on the estates of the great landowners were local farmers attached as *coloni* to the soil of their master's estate. Regarding the social origin and social status of the clergy below the episcopate, service played a much more important role than rank in the clerical hierarchy.

By analyzing the imperial legislation regarding the Christian clergy and supplementing it with information won from our documentary source material, I want to show that this trend of social differentiation of the clergy, based on social origin, wealth and education, had its onset already in the early fourth century and provided the basis for the increasing secularization of the church regarding the recruiting and promotion of its members in the centuries that followed.