



[A dedication to the Augustales at Herculaneum \(AE 1979, 169\)](#) [1]

A dedication to the town council and the officers of the imperial cult in Herculaneum.

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Dedication

Original Location/Place: Placed c. 3m above ground level in the cella of the so-called 'College' of the Augustales in Herculaneum.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): in situ.

Date: 1 CE to 30 CE

Physical Characteristics:

Large marble plaque with large and well cut letters. Fragmented into four pieces, all of which survive.

Material: Marble

Measurements:

Height: 69 cm

Width: 99 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications:

Fragments 1 & 2: *AE* (1979) 169

Fragment 3: G. Guadagno, *Cronache Ercolanensi* 8 (1978) p. 132-134, Nr. 1

Fragment 4: *AE* (1986) 164

Commentary: This inscription was discovered in the excavations of Herculaneum that took place in the 1960s. It had fractured into four pieces, which were 'suspended' 3.5m above the ground level in the pyroclastic material that had filled up inside the building (for discussion of the findspot, see Allroggen-Bedel, "Das sogenannte Forum von Herculaneum und die Borbonischen Grabungen von 1739", p. 97-109). The inscription records that two brothers, Aulus Lucius Proculus and Aulus Lucius Iulianus, paid for a dinner for the town councillors and the *Augustales* – the 'members of collegial associations officially devoted to the imperial cult' (Ostrow, "Augustales", p. 364). The inscription records that this dinner was given 'at the dedication' (*dedication*), but does not make clear exactly what is being dedicated; early scholarship suggested that the plaque was evidence that the two brothers had paid for the construction of the entire building and dedicated it to Augustus (Guadagno, "Supplemento", p. 134), but later work has suggested that the inscription more probably commemorated a statue or an altar (Laird, *Civic Monuments*, p. 115-6). This is emphasized by the unusual formula at the beginning of the inscription, 'sacred to Augustus' (*Augusto sacrum*), which Margaret Laird has demonstrated is rarely attested in building inscriptions, and is rather reserved for honorific statue bases (*Civic Monuments* p. 117).

The building - the 'College' of the *Augustales* - has often been associated with the presence of the imperial cult in Herculaneum, and should be understood as a form of meeting space for the officers of it, rather than a temple for public worship (Laird, *Civic Monuments* p. 120; Wallace-Hadrill *The Monumental Centre of Herculaneum* p. 136-7). The officers are named in the inscription as *Augustales*; although established before the principate as an administrative role connected with the maintenance of local neighbourhood shrines, under Augustus the position was reorganised as the membership of collegial associations, which became inextricably linked with devotion to the imperial cult. The role is attested in more than 2500 inscriptions from towns all across Italy and in the western part of the empire, although very rarely in the East (Ostrow, "Augustales", p. 364). As well as epitaphs and honorary dedications, several 'membership lists' for the *Augustales* have survived, such as the 'Album from Herculaneum' (*CIL* X, 1403), which together reveal that the role was taken up by both freeborn and freedmen alike (for the status of *Augustales*, see Mouritsen, "Honores Libertini", p. 237-48). This is significant for our understanding of how the role of the freedman operated in civic life, and for how their inclusion in the celebrations



of the imperial cult was used to spread its popularity.

Traditionally, the inclusion of freedmen in a visible position of responsibility has been understood as a deliberate measure on the part of the principate to encourage their 'official' involvement in public life; although excluded from public office and the holding of magistracies, the position of *Augustalis* - which required an obligatory payment to the town treasury - provided a route through which those freedmen of substantial personal wealth could engage in traditional modes of civic benefaction and euergetism. It was an 'alternative *cursus honorum*', or career path; an Augustan innovation that mitigated against potential unrest caused by unhappy freedmen who had no obvious outlet for their social aspirations (Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World* p. 250-1, *contra* Ostrow, "Augustales", p. 364-379). This interpretation has characterised the freedmen *Augustales* as an institutionalised 'middle class,' that both tempered social unrest and guaranteed the loyalty of wealthy freedmen to the emperor and his regime (Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, p. 250). The numerous attestations of the role in the epigraphic record would therefore infer the ardent support of the freedmen *Augustales* for the emperor, and the successful manipulation of their loyalty. However, Henrik Mouritsen has, recently, warned against this over-interpretation and suggested a more nuanced approach to the role of the *Augustalis* in the early empire. He proposed instead that the reorganisation of the role under Augustus was rather a wider strategy to consolidate order and to accommodate the growing wealth (and therefore implied social status) of certain freedmen across Italy and the west. Rather than originating as a 'centralised initiative,' the inclusion of freedmen in the management of the imperial cult should be understood as an encouragement of behaviour, across *all* social strata, to behave in a way that honoured and paid tribute to the emperor (Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, p. 250). Although a position of civic responsibility, an *Augustalis* held no actual power or authority beyond the symbolic in provincial towns; their activities were still monitored and confirmed by those in 'real' power, the members of the town council, the *decuriones*. The role of the *Augustalis* should, therefore, be better understood as a local response to the new political reality; their presence was attested in public spaces where inhabitants of all means and social status could make their offering, however modest, and therefore contribute in their own individual way to the 'celebration of the new political order' (Mouritsen, *Freedman in the Roman World*, p. 250). This was a powerful propaganda tool, that both encouraged the private appellation of honour to the emperor in a way that avoided the subversive involvement of the state, but also allowed the state - even at a local level - to manage and exploit the resources of these wealthy freedmen (Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, p. 230). As Henrik Mouritsen has rightly stated, it 'militated against unseemly displays of wealth that might upset elite sensibilities...and steered the freedmen away from the self-indulgence and *luxuria* to which they were considered especially prone' (*Freedmen in the Roman World*, p. 260). The reorganisation of the *Augustales* therefore fit with Augustus's social and religious reforms, which contained moralising aspects against excessive behaviour, and which supported the image of the emperor as a central example of piety and moderation to which all should aim.

This dedication from Herculaneum should, then, be read in light of the principate's need to manage the practicalities of the imperial cult. Although the constitution legislated against the inclusion of freedmen in the administration of civic or cultic activities, this proved to be at odds with the necessity of their involvement in spreading the popularity of the imperial cult in the early empire, on a social and economic level.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Augustus](#) [2]
- [sacrum](#) [3]
- [Augustalis](#) [4]
- [decurio](#) [5]
- [dedicatio](#) [6]

Thematic keywords:

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- [Augustus](#) [8]
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- [town council](#) [10]
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- [social order](#) [14]



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