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Keeping it in the *Familia*: Navigating the Associative Milieu in Ancient Rome

Abstract:

For sub-elite and marginalized populations in any society with rigid, circumscribed socioeconomic categories, the arduous process of securing avenues for economic prosperity and social ascent was essential, both for the present and a family's descendants. The Roman empire, with its copious and heterogeneous evidence for social interaction, provides valuable case-studies on the ways people from the lower strata of society both navigated established socioeconomic and legal systems and forged their own paths in the pursuit of upward mobility. Meaningful civic engagement and avenues for social mobility relied heavily on securing a niche within a community's 'associative milieu,' that is, the array of local professional and voluntary associations which linked the lower classes to the elite.

In this talk, Dr. Easton uses epigraphic texts and Roman onomastic research to explore groups of enslaved and freed Romans whose liminal status allows us to pose new questions about the motivations and processes through which these associations formed, from the ground up, and how Romans who began life at the lowest rung on the social ladder operated within this environment. Despite being largely shut out from existing associative avenues, the *servi* and *liberti publici* leveraged their official organization, the *familia publica*, as a means to engage in the broader socioeconomic and political landscape of their community, participate in public and exclusive commensal events, and strengthen their civic identity.

In addition to offering a case-study of how relationships based on asymmetrical dependency worked in Roman society, this paper speaks to current public discourse in which some seek to downplay and create counternarratives of the atrocities and enduring impact enslavement had on its victims and their descendants.

Bio:

Jeffrey Easton is a specialist in Roman social history, Latin language and literature, and Latin epigraphy, and he also maintains a passion for researching and teaching about material culture. Since completing his PhD in Classics at the University of Toronto in 2019, Jeffrey Easton has taught in the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Department at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. He currently holds the rank of Assistant Professor of Classics.

Jeffrey Easton has published peer-reviewed articles on social and economic mobility in the Roman empire, and his first monograph, which was published by Brill in 2024, reexamines the trajectory of enslaved and freed families in Roman communities and pushes back against ameliorating views of slavery as a temporary condition and positive notions of a prosperous and consciously proud Roman freedman class. Manumission was a far more complex process, and it did not always put formerly enslaved people and their descendants on the straight and narrow path of upward mobility.