

THE ROLE OF THE *PRAEFECTURA FABRUM*

CAFARO (A.) *Governare l'impero. La praefectura fabrum fra legami personali e azione politica (II sec. a.C. – III sec. d.C.)*. (Historia Einzelschriften 262.) Pp. 613. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2021. Cased, €92. ISBN: 978-3-515-12522-2.

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The *praefectura fabrum* represents a highly debated administrative post among the magistracies of the Roman world: its origin, its function within the administration of Rome and its prerogatives are only some of the several problematic issues that concern the *praefectura fabrum*.

Using both literary and epigraphic documents, this book aims at following the emergence and the evolution of the *praefectura fabrum* from the Republican period to the Severan age, by focusing on the main innovations that concerned it. Thus, the book reveals its main innovative aspect as it is the first to try to provide a comprehensive overview of the role not only with regard to its administrative functions, which have been amply debated by modern scholars, but also, and especially, with respect to its political dimension.

The book opens with a brief sketch of the modern scholarship on the *praefectura fabrum* (pp. 15–25). The perspective that C. takes clearly emerges: far from proposing a quantitative study of the attestations of *praefecti fabrum*, which is correctly presented as methodologically wrong due to the impossibility of defining to what extent the available evidence is representative of the historical reality, C. aims in the first instance to provide a comprehensive and complex picture of the *praefectura fabrum* in all its aspects and, in particular, in its political dimension, which appears to have only been partially explored in existing scholarship.

The relation between the *praefectura fabrum* and the concepts of *clientela* and *patronus* represents one of the most interesting points of the discussion: starting from the fact that, in the Republican age, the *praefectus fabrum* was normally appointed by a magistrate *cum imperio* (pp. 80ff.), C. investigates the political relationships between the *praefecti fabrum* and their appointing magistrates. In this respect, as correctly pointed out by C., the literary sources appear to be especially useful, as they, as a rule, mention both the *praefectus* and the appointing magistrate, who is frequently bound to his *praefectus fabrum* by *patronus / cliens* ties. The close relationship between *praefecti* and nominating magistrates also arises from the epigraphic evidence. Especially for the republican age the *praefectura fabrum* – far from being a simple administrative post (frequently, but not regularly, within equestrian careers) – appears to be a useful instrument for members of both Roman and local elites to enter a political career. As rightly emphasised by C., the *praefectura fabrum* also seems to play an analogous role at a local level: as epigraphic evidence shows, many of the attested *praefecti fabrum* started local careers in their communities (mostly in Italy during the Republican period) after exiting the *praefectura fabrum*. In this respect C. underlines how the study of the *praefectura fabrum*, which is fruitfully explored by means of a prosopographical approach, can importantly contribute to a better comprehension of the political (and/or private) ties that bound members of the Italian elites and the Roman ruling class: indeed, the appointment to the *praefectura fabrum* was intended as a way of promotion for members of local elites (p. 80). The results emerging from the study of the diffusion of the *praefectura fabrum* mean progress as they contribute, with new

reflections, to the scholarly debate on the political network that tied Roman political leaders to Italian cities before and after the Social War.

From a chronological point of view C. stresses that appreciable differences – with respect to the origins, the role and the function of the *praefectura fabrum* – do not emerge in the passage from the Republican period to the early imperial age. This aspect is especially interesting in the light of the fact that the surviving evidence from the imperial period does not register the names either of the *patrones* or of the magistrates who proceeded to nominate the *praefecti fabrum*. According to C., such a peculiarity should not be attributed to a sort of decadence of the *praefectura fabrum*, as some scholars assume, or to other changes that possibly affected the role, but rather to the altered political conditions of the Augustan age: in the light of the increasing contraction of the republican magistrates' powers, following the establishment of Augustus' position as ruler of Rome, the indication – in the inscription – of the magistrate *cum imperio* who proceeded to nominate a *praefectus fabrum* probably appeared – or started to appear – unimportant. On the other hand, C. convincingly shows how the institutional and political changes that were determined by Augustus' rise to power affected neither the meaning nor the status of the *praefectura fabrum*, which continued to be an important – although not necessary – step for those starting an equestrian career. The results of the investigation are stimulating, as the meaning of the *praefectura fabrum* is not simply studied on the administrative level, but also explained in its political dimension, which involves the figure of the *princeps*.

As to the functions of the *praefecti fabrum*, C. stresses how they were not affected by the political-institutional development that was brought about by the establishment of the Augustan regime (pp. 185–202). As C. rightly points out, the prerogatives of the *praefecti fabrum* appear to be disparate, as they regularly depended on the specific exigencies of the appointing magistrate (pp. 197–203).

A further aspect of the evolution of the *praefectura fabrum* throughout the early imperial age concerns the geographical origins of the *praefecti fabrum*. Whereas, during the Republic, the majority of prefects stems from Italy, in the Julio-Claudian period the epigraphic documents indicate the provincial origin of the *praefecti* (p. 195). Although this situation could be determined by the status of extant epigraphic evidence, one could also link it, following C., to the increasing power that the provincial elites started to take on in the early Imperial period and to the increasingly closer ties that they established with the ruling classes of Rome.

On the basis of an accurate analysis of the epigraphic evidence, C. follows the evolution of the *praefectura fabrum* during the first two centuries of the empire until the Severan age. Whilst the main characteristics of the *praefectura fabrum* seem to remain partially unchanged (especially as to its prerogatives and functions, which, however, were reduced), the increasing decrease of documents attesting to *praefecti fabrum* is interpreted as proof of the parallel decline of the role (p. 248). This decline is explained by the increasing spread of Roman citizenship: if, as C. aims to show, the *praefectura fabrum* was mostly an instrument of promotion and integration for Italian and provincial elites into the Roman imperial system, once several measures and juridical mechanisms contributed to the diffusion of the *civitas Romana* (and thus to the integration of provincials in the Roman state), the *praefectura fabrum* could have lost its main attraction. In this respect one may also wonder if the *praefectura fabrum* could have worked, on a juridical level, as an instrument of attraction of provincials into the Roman civic body, once we accept that the introduction of analogous measures may have led to the decline of the magistracy.

The book is an important contribution to the scholarly debate on one of the most problematic positions in the Roman state. By means of a rich epigraphic dossier, which

occupies a large part of the book, C. reconstructs, on the one hand, the evolution of the *praefectura fabrum*, which he correctly reads in connection with the parallel development of Roman institutions; on the other hand, he points to the political function that characterised the post as an instrument of civic integration, which appears to have been underrated in previous scholarship. Among the various problems and issues that the book raises, one seems especially important: the close connection between (minor) administrative roles and political connections, which should be constantly kept in mind when studying the multifaceted bureaucratic apparatus of the Roman empire.

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