

ON THE *SEVIRI AUGUSTALES* AS AGENTS OF ROMANITY IN *HISPANIA*¹

Barrón Ruiz de la Cuesta, Alberto²

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the general features of the *seviratus Augustalis*, its territorial presence and continuity in the Roman Empire, and its influence in the spreading of the cultural and religious Roman customs in *Hispania*, through the study of its preserved epigraphic sources. The *seviratus Augustalis* was especially developed in the Western towns of the Empire, it lasted from the 1st to the 3rd century AD, and it was a semi-official institution mainly held by wealthy freedmen looking for social recognition. Despite the unresolved debate about its concrete function, the numerous preserved inscriptions in relation to the Augustality provide important information about the religious and munificent actions of its members. From the study of the existing epigraphic inscriptions in *Hispania*, we will demonstrate the role played by the *seviri Augustales* as promoters of Romanity, based on elements such as the worship of Roman deities, the connection of different gods with the emperor, the diffusion of Latin onomastics, the adoption of Roman magistracies and the imitation of the local Romanised elites. Consequently, this position created in Italy worked in *Hispania* as a diffusor of the Roman religion and the Roman social order, promoting the consolidation of the imperial regime in the provinces.

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² University of Cantabria, Department of Historical Sciences, Post-doctoral Researcher. Av. Los Castros s/n, 39005 Santander (Spain). barronal@unican.es.

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Throughout history, Rome and Iberia have often been connected in different cultural features, and the Roman period is one of the main examples of that relation. This study focuses on a particular aspect that shows the vast influence of Italy over *Hispania* after the Roman conquest. The Roman Republic, and the Empire later, not only controlled their provincial territories, but they also transformed them into new dynamic areas of the Roman world. The provinces became part of the *Romanitas* or Romanity, understood as “the culture, civilization, way of life, *et cetera*, of the ancient Romans” and “the fact of being Roman, or of having adopted Roman customs or institutions” (OED 2010). That was one of the keys of the adaptability and the long-term existence of the Roman Empire, whose cultural impact remains to this day.

In relation to this global process of acculturation, we will expound the importance of the *seviratus Augustalis* as an institution that contributed to the development of the Romanity in *Hispania*, reinforced the socio-political system created and maintained by the Romans since their arrival in *Hispania*, and promoted the Roman religion. With that aim, we will introduce the central features of the *seviratus Augustalis*, its main debated points, its presence throughout the Roman Empire and the particularities observed in *Hispania*.

1.

General aspects of the *seviratus Augustalis*

Studies about the *seviratus Augustalis* are plentiful. There have been numerous works and articles about this institution since the middle of the 19th century. Different general studies have analysed the conditions of this institution in the whole Empire (Egger, 1844; Murlot, 1895; von Premerstein, 1895; Taylor, 1914; *Id.* 1924; Nock, 1934; Oliver, 1958; Duthoy, 1978; Ostrow, 1985; *Id.* 1990; Abramenko, 1993; Castillo García, 2003; Mouritsen, 2006; Vandevoorde, 2015; Laird, 2015; van Haepere, 2016), but there

are also several books and papers about the existing sources concerning the *seviri Augustales* on a regional or local level, which have multiplied in the last decades. In the case of *Hispania*, we can mention some works about the entire Iberian Peninsula (Ciccotti, 1891; Étienne, 1958; Serrano Delgado, 1988; Arrizabalaga Lafuente, 1994; Jordán Lorenzo, 2004; *Id.* 2003–2005) as well as a selection of numerous articles centred in the Hispanic provinces of *Baetica* (Melchor Gil, 1994a; *Id.* 1994b), *Hispania Citerior* (Navarro Caballero, 1997) and *Lusitania* (Andreu Pintado, 1998).

The *seviratus Augustalis* was an institution of semi-official nature –meaning that it wasn’t an official magistrature– which flourished in many Roman towns that had the status of *coloniae* and *municipia*. It appeared in Italy at the end of the 1st century B.C. and spread throughout the Empire between 12 B.C. and the 3rd century of the Common Era, becoming a typical institution of the provincial towns, mainly in the western and Latin-speaking part of the Roman Empire.

Concerning its internal organisation, it was a collegial institution with six annual members and an association of former members, with its own building and treasury. Its first term *sevir* refers to the number of members, meaning literally “six men”. The term *Augustalis*, which derives from the title *Augustus*, shows a clear link with the emperor, and also with Imperial Worship, in the opinion of different researchers (e. g. Egger, 1844; Mourlot, 1895; von Premerstein, 1895; Taylor, 1914; Duthoy, 1978).

The *seviri Augustales* were appointed by the local ruling class of the *decuriones* and assumed some religious and civic functions, whose nature is under discussion. They had a higher status than common citizens and were also known as the group of the *sevirales* or *Augustales*. One of the main features of this institution was that its members were mostly wealthy freedmen whose wealth came from commercial and craft businesses in urban areas. This was their way to acquire official recognition, since the magistracies and priesthoods were forbidden to freedmen. In return, they had to fund many public donations, even more than the holders of local magistracies reserved to *ingenui* or freeborn people.

The preserved sources about the *seviri Augustales* are basically epigraphic. Within the vast Roman literature, the sevirate is only mentioned in the story of the *Cena Trimalchionis* of Petronius (Petr. *Satyr.* 27–78) and in two brief allusions by two scholiasts of Horatius: Porphyrio (Porph. *ad Hor. Sat.* II, 3, 281) and Pseudo-Acro (Ps.-Acro, *ad Hor. Sat.* II, 3, 281). The long passage of Petronius contains rich and detailed information about the character and behaviour of the sumptuously rich freedman and *sevir*, Trimalchio, and it also mentions his friends Habinnas and Hermeros, who share his status and position. But the parodic purpose of this novel complicates the interpretation of the real characteristics of the institution. As to the two scholiasts, they make only brief and confusing comments about the function of the *Augustales*, indicating their priestly role but with certain mistakes that promote doubts about this aspect.

In contrast with the scarce literary sources, there are about three thousand inscriptions related to the *seviri Augustales*. Around two thousand of them are in Italy, and the other thousand belong to the territories of the Roman provinces.

In the following map (Figure 1) we can see the distribution of the evidence of the Augustality throughout the Roman Empire, with the number of certain inscriptions preserved in each province and Italic region. Their original area is Italy, with the highest concentration of inscriptions. Almost all of its regions have hundreds of inscriptions about the *seviri Augustales*, as we can see. We must clarify that the numbers for the Italic regions are not completely accurate. We include references to some *seviri* that could belong to the republican period or would have no connection with the Augustality, especially among the 242 cases in the northern Italic region of *Transpadana* / *Regio XI*. But the comparatively large number of Italic inscriptions illustrates the origin of the *seviratus Augustalis*, as well as the predominance of Latin epigraphy in Italy.

From the Italic towns, the institution spread to the provinces, principally to the Latin-speaking ones, in Europe. The most prolific provinces are *Gallia Narbonensis*, *Hispania Citerior* and *Dalmatia*, all of them located on the Mediterranean coast

and well-connected to Italy. In relation to this, the South-East of *Gallia*, the Mediterranean area of *Hispania* and the provinces of the *Illyricum* contain most of the provincial inscriptions. The African testimonies are considerably fewer, whereas the Eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Empire has only scarce examples of these epigraphs.

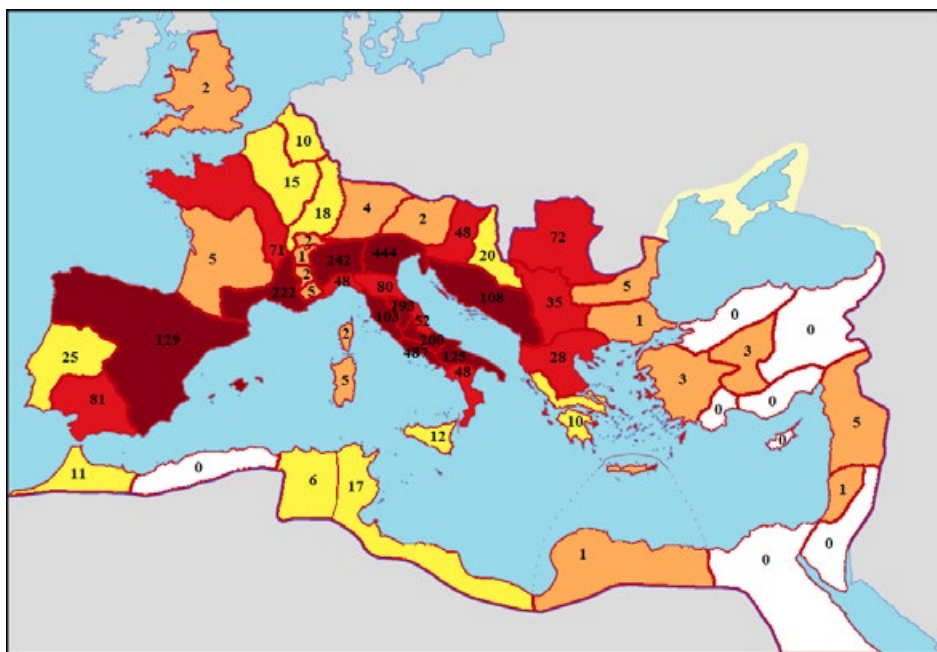


Figure 1. Provincial distribution of the inscriptions mentioning *sevir Augustales*. Edited from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Empire_in_120_AD.png

The three provinces of *Hispania* have a significant number of testimonies that testify to the importance of the *seviratus Augustalis* in this territory. They include around 250 inscriptions, a quarter of all the provincial cases in the Empire. Their internal distribution in the Hispanic provinces and their subdivisions of the *conventus iuridici* show the prominence of the South and the East of the Iberian Peninsula (Figure 2). That means the entire province of *Baetica* and the Mediterranean coast of *Hispania Citerior* –*conventus Tarraconensis*–, in contrast with the secondary role of the rest of this province and *Lusitania*. As an urban

institution, the Augustality developed particularly in the more urbanized areas connected with trade routes by sea or by river. The most prosperous communities of freedmen lived in this kind of town, in places like *Tarraco*, *Barcino*, *Corduba*, *Hispalis*, *Augusta Emerita* and *Carthago Nova*. On the other hand, the central and Atlantic regions of *Hispania* had minor contacts with the main commercial networks and developed their urbanisation much less, so the *seviri Augustales* are exceptional there.

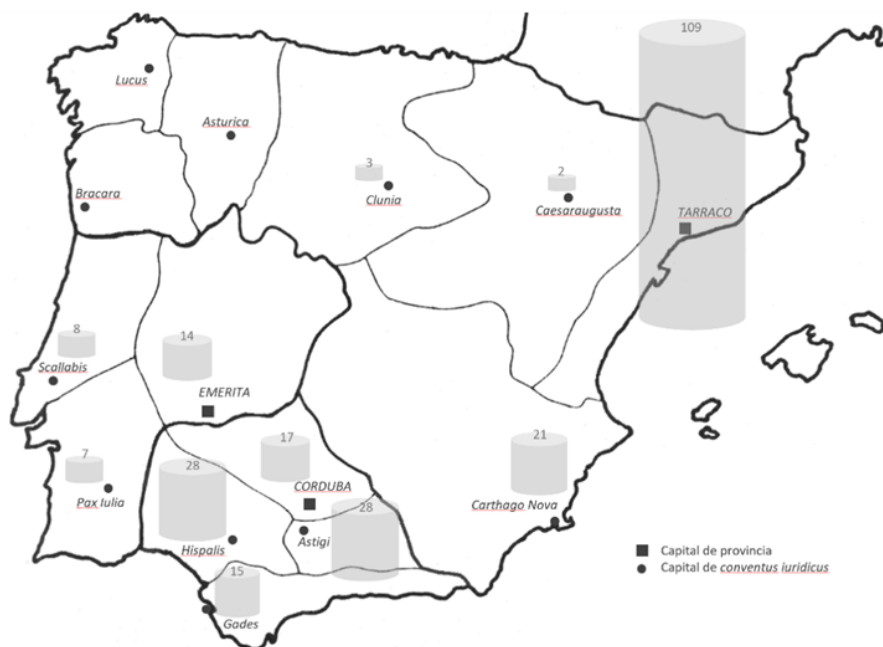


Figure 2. Distribution of the inscriptions about *seviri Augustales* among the Hispanic *conventus iuridici* (source: author).

The chronological evolution of the studied institution corresponds to the so-called “epigraphic habit”, an expression that defines the evolution of the production of epigraphs during the Roman Empire (MacMullen, 1982; Mrozeck, 1973; *Id.* 1988; Meyer, 1990). The epigraphic habit shows a rising tendency in the 1st century AD, a peak in the 2nd century and a sharp decline in the 3rd, due to transformations in the civic conscience and in the ways of public representation. Those changes were also related to a strong

decrease in the number of freedmen, undermining the social basis of the *seviratus Augustalis*, which happened in the same period when epigraphy declined.

As an example of this process, we can see in the next table (Figure 3) the chronological distribution of the Hispanic inscriptions related to *seviri Augustales*. Excepting the case of *Lusitania*, where most of the inscriptions belong to the 1st century, the evolution is as previously mentioned, with an increasing trend in the 1st century and the most prolific point in the 2nd, before a sudden drop in the 3rd century.

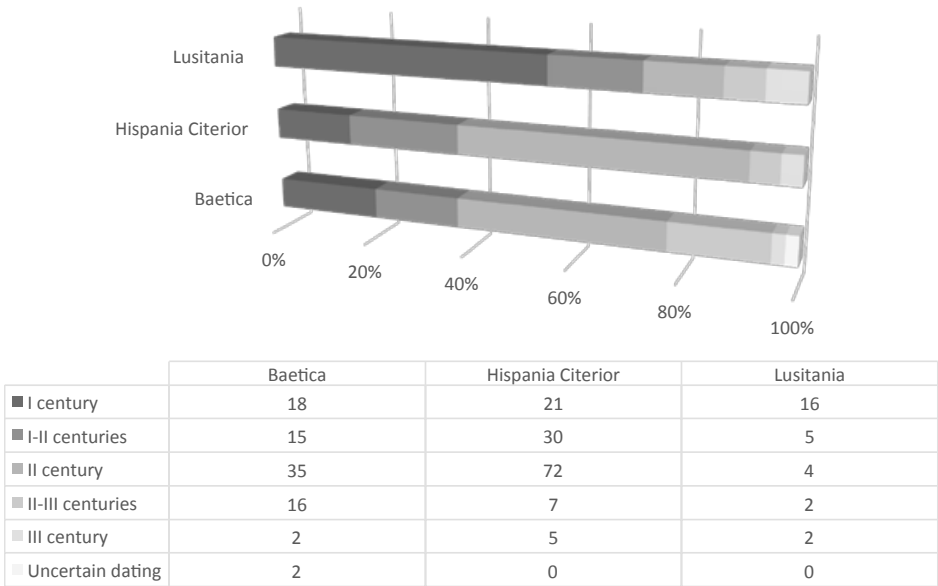


Figure 3. Chronological distribution of the Hispanic inscriptions about *seviri Augustales* (source: author).

2.

Terminological variations

One aspect that causes confusion about the *seviratus Augustalis* concerns its terminological variations. The epigraphic writing of the word *sevir* can appear in four different ways, depending on the mode of representing the number “six”: *IIIIIVir*, *VIvir*, *sevir* or *sexvir*. The following table (Figure 4) shows the presence and distribution of testimonies in the three provinces of Roman *Hispania*, where the fourth of those variations does not appear. These only illustrate local epigraphic customs and don’t imply any difference in the content of the *seviratus*.

PROVINCES / WRITINGS	IIIIIVIR	VIVIR	SEVIR	SEXVIR	TOTAL
Baetica	23	34	16	–	73
Hispania Citerior	70	27	45	–	142
Lusitania	4	2	–	–	6
Total	97	63	61	–	121

Figure 4. Writing variations of the term *sevir* in the provinces of *Hispania* (source: author).

The variability is even higher regarding the ways of mentioning the institution. The next table (Figure 5) indicates the six variations present in *Hispania*. The main one by far is *sevir Augustalis*, followed by *Augustalis*, *sevir* and the regional expression *honos seviratus*, almost exclusively from *Hispania*. Despite regional differences that can be perceived even in the case of *Hispania*, the most common form in the whole Empire is *sevir Augustalis*, so we use it for convenience as a generic name to include all the other terms. There were even more words to call the *seviratus Augustalis*, especially in Italy, such as the relatively frequent title of *magister Augustalis*, and several variations from *Augustalis* adapted to the names of the following emperors –*Tiberialis*, *Iulialis*, *Claudialis*, *Neroniensis*, *Flavialis*, *Titialis*, *Nervialis*. This tendency stopped in the 2nd century, when the terminology for the Augustality reached a higher homogeneity, restricted to the

variants *sevir Augustalis*, *Augustalis* and *sevir*. After many studies looking for peculiarities that would explain the existence of different institutions (von Premerstein, 1895; Duthoy, 1978), the most reasonable interpretation is that they belonged to the same reality (Abramenko, 1993; Mouritsen, 2006). The Augustality spread in an improvised and decentralized way, by initiative of each town, so its names never had a complete uniformity.

TERMS / PROVINCES	SEVIR AUGUSTALIS	AUGUSTALIS	SEVIR	SEVIRALIS	HONOS SEVIRATUS	SEVIRATUS	TOTAL
<i>Baetica</i>	32	17	20	2	19	–	90
<i>Hispania Citerior</i>	101	4	20	1	18	3	147
<i>Lusitania</i>	–	23	4	–	2	–	29
Total	133	44	44	3	39	3	266

Figure 5. Different terms for the Augustality in the provinces of *Hispania* (source: author).

3. Function of the Augustality

Due to the epigraphic nature of our sources and their usually concise content, it's difficult to define the concrete function of the *seviratus Augustalis*. It is currently under discussion, and it has become the biggest mystery about this institution. Traditionally, the *seviri Augustales* were considered priests of the Imperial Cult, due to the link of their title with the Roman emperors (Egger, 1844: 23–24; Mourlot, 1895: 9–37; von Premerstein, 1895: 824–856; Taylor, 1914: 232–241; Étienne, 1958: 275–279; Duthoy, 1978: 1293–1306; Kneissl, 1980; Fishwick, 1991: 609–616). Nevertheless, the epigraphic evidence does not confirm that idea. The priests of the Imperial Cult were the more prestigious *flamines Augustales*. The *seviri Augustales* have some religious elements as the second word of their title denotes, but they lack any priestly sign or any indication of what their secondary role in the worship

of the emperors would be. The absence of positive proof in that direction has made the scholars of the latest generations orient their studies towards socioeconomic aspects of the institution (Ostrow, 1990; Abramenko, 1993; Vandevoorde, 2015; Laird, 2015) or even to deny that they had any religious role (Gradel, 2002: 228–231; Mouritsen, 2006: 240–242), but it must be said that there had been a minor tendency of sceptics about the religious functions of the *seviri Augustales* from the first generations of researchers (Mommson, 1888: 454; Nock, 1934: 636; Oliver, 1958: 492–493).

On the contrary, there is plenty of proof about the public munificence of the *seviri Augustales*. Their evergetic donations to the local community were frequent and expensive: statues, religious offerings and temples, public buildings and infrastructure, ludic performances and competitions, *sportulae* or distributions of money and goods, banquets, *et cetera*. Different authors have suggested that financing these actions could have been the real purpose of the Augustality (Mouritsen, 2006: 247–248), and recently the religious and the civic theses have been reconciled, arguing that the *seviri Augustales* were in charge of the local *Augustalia* or *ludi Augustales*, consecrated to *Augustus*. By organizing and funding this festival, they would combine both civic and religious aspects (van Haepen, 2016: 141–145).

4. Agents of Romanity

It has always been said that the *seviri Augustales* were mainly freedmen. This servile background is confirmed by the epigraphy through the frequent mentioning of their freedman status and through their abundant Greek *cognomina*. Greek *cognomina* were typical of slaves in the Latin part of the Roman Empire, even if we should avoid making an automatic rule from this. Independently of their real homeland, it was quite common to give Greek names to slaves in Roman society. Despite their non-Roman origin, the *seviri Augustales* embraced the Roman customs and

diffused them in the Hispanic territory. The analysis of the inscriptions reveals their adoption of Roman onomastics, accepting this essential aspect of Roman culture in order to integrate themselves in the local community. They used especially the *tria nomina*, often a mention of their former master, and rarely referred to the voting tribe.

Their motivation for this attitude was social mobility. Through the Augustality, they were reaching a higher status. Actually, the *seviri Augustales* were inspired by the local elite or *ordo decurionum*. They imitated the *decuriones* and tried to be recognized as a subordinated elite, an *ordo* of second level (Egger, 1844: 45–50; Murlot, 1895: 86–90; Nock, 1934: 634–636; Oliver, 1958: 482–483; Duthoy, 1974: 151–154; *Id.* 1978: 1266–1289; Ostrow, 1985: 70–72; Abramenko, 1993: 11–57 and 144–154). There are no preserved cases of this in *Hispania*, but sometimes the *seviri Augustales* even used the word *ordo* or reproduced the actions of the ruling group, like pretending to promulgate *decreta*. This emulation of the *decuriones* illustrates a top-down process of acculturation that eventually influenced lower social groups as well. Besides that, the possibilities of promotion reinforced the stability of the social system and the acceptance and local implementation of Roman institutions (Ostrow, 1990: 368–375).

Furthermore, the constructions and spectacles funded by the *seviri Augustales* helped to diffuse these prestigious and impressive elements of the Roman culture in *Hispania*. There are numerous epigraphic references in *Hispania* – about 150 inscriptions – to their funding of temples, baths, public buildings, theatre performances and gladiatorial games, distributions of money and goods, testamentary donations, as well as banquets for the community such as *cenae* or *epula* (Figure 6). By performing these actions, often dedicated *ob honorem seviratus*, they acted as promoters of the Roman traditions and institutions.



Figure 6. Inscription with a munificence consisting in public baths, a yearly contribution for its maintenance, distribution of money and a banquet, made by the *sevir* L. Aemilius Daphnus. CIL II, 5489 (Murgi, Baetica). Source: *Hispania Epigraphica*.

Roman religion was closely linked to the civic and political sphere, so these fields often mixed. Independently of their functions, the *seviri Augustales* contributed to the spread of Roman cults in *Hispania* through their offerings. In fact, their religious acts seem to have been more frequent than those of the local ruling class holders of the official priesthoods, as the comparison between the total inscriptions of the *decuriones* and the *seviri Augustales* in *Hispania* reveals. The table below (Figure 7) shows a much higher percentage of religious epigraphs from the latter group – almost 28% against 8% – despite the higher status and wealth of the former one. In *Tarraco* there is even the peculiarity that some *seviri Augustales* held the local priesthood of *magister Larum*, but this priestly feature has no parallel in the rest of *Hispania*.

Overall, the analysis of the religious dedications of the *seviri Augustales* exposes a clear majority of Roman divinities. Some of them were probably the result of a syncretism between Roman and local gods, but anyway the dominance of Roman divinities fits with the role played by the *seviri Augustales* in the acculturation

of *Hispania*. They have only two offerings – out of 70 – that were made to certain native gods, and they are located in *Lusitania*, the furthest Hispanic province from Rome. One of them is dedicated to the gods *Ana* and *Barraeca* (Figure 8) and another one to *dea Sancta Ataecina Turibriga Proserpina*, whose name is syncretized with the Roman goddess *Proserpina* (*HEp* 5, 76).

PROVINCE	INSCRIPTIONS OF THE SEVIRI AUGUSTALES		INSCRIPTIONS OF THE DECURIONES	
	RELIGIOUS	TOTAL	RELIGIOUS	TOTAL
<i>Baetica</i>	32 (36.4%)	88	59 (14.7%)	402
<i>Hispania Citerior</i>	29 (21.5%)	135	19 (3.1%)	606
<i>Lusitania</i>	9 (31%)	29	14 (9.7%)	144
Total	70 (27.7%)	252	92 (8%)	1152

Figure 7. Comparison of the religious inscriptions of Hispanic *seviri Augustales* and *decuriones*.



Figure 8. Lintel of the mausoleum of *Caius Iulius Successianus, Augustalis*, illustrated with the deities *Ana* and *Barraeca*. *HEp* 5, 105 (*Augusta Emerita, Lusitania*).

There are other patterns to the consecrations made by the *seviri Augustales* in *Hispania* that confirm them as promoters of Romanity. For example, two dedications were made to civic deities like *de Genius* of the town (*CIL* II, 1362 and 2069), emphasizing the municipal identity. Many of them are consecrated to gods related with commerce, like *Mercurius* and *Neptunus*, as could be expected from the professional occupations of their dedicators. But the main aspect to note is their link with the imperial

authority. Most of the offerings – 42 out of 70 – were made to deities who had the epithet *Augustus* or *Augusta*, 13 of them were dedicated to deified imperial virtues, and a few cases – only four – were consecrated directly to the emperor or a member of his family. This connection reflects the support of the *Augustales* to the imperial regime. The emperor was almost never in provincial towns, so there he was personified in the ceremonies of imperial worship. Through their private dedications, the *seviri Augustales* helped to make the power of the emperor more visible, to spread his fame and influence and to promote the belief in his divinity.

In conclusion, we consider that the studied institution wasn't only a dynamic platform for the social mobility of wealthy freedmen, but also a useful tool for the promotion of the Roman culture in *Hispania*. The *seviri Augustales* worked as agents of Romanity in different spheres, including the social customs, the local institutions and the religious practices of the population. As far as we can judge from what remains, they made a certain contribution to the further acceptance of Roman traditions and deities, to the stability of the society and to the strengthening of the imperial system.

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