Augustine, Wannabe Philosopher: the search for *otium honestum*

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**Introduction**

My project attempts to reimagine the early career of Augustine through three formative milestones in Augustine’s early career before he was ordained bishop of Hippo. The tracing of Augustine’s publications at each of these points reveals the choice of a career much different than the one that chose him. Rather than the episcopacy, Augustine presents himself in his early career as pursuing a Christianized form of otium honestum, or the honorable leisure of a philosopher.

**Cassiacum: Philosophical Retreat**

Halfway between retiring from his teaching position and being baptized, Augustine retires to the Cassiacum estate to read, write, and explore the otium honestum (honorable leisure) of a philosophical, communal lifestyle.

**Text**

- *Confessions* 8.12.29: “Take read, take read.”
- *Paulinus*, Epistle 16.6: “arguit enim ipso facundia tuae doctrinaeque facundialibus voluntatis tibi petitis in sacrís litteris parum quam aut spectabuntur aut faculantibus abscedas... vocent tibi ut et philosophos sit, non vocent ut Christianum sit.”
- *Contra Academicos* 3.20.19: “spat platonikern me intertem, quod avivsa rusticis non regnes, reperturam esse confindis.”

The Cassiacum Dialogues demonstrate an explicit synthesis of Christianity and philosophy at work in a way that persists in the early development of Augustine’s theology.

**Thagaste: Business as Usual**

Augustine moves back to his home estate, and is frustrated by his inability to enjoy the *otium honestum* (honorable leisure) of his Cassiacum experience.

**Text**

- *Epistle 18.1*: “...for I do not know whether anything concerning freedom from care can be hoped for in this world.”
- *Epistle 14.1*: “...we do not, nevertheless, have so much leisure as you think or as much as you know we’ve always wanted and indeed do want.”
- *Epistle 21.3*: “...which I did not do before, because, indeed, I did not have time; then indeed I was ordained [at that very moment] when we were thinking about the time itself for a break for the purpose of understanding the divine scriptures and thus we desired to put off things so that it might be possible for us to have leisure for this business.”

The negotium (or business, opposite of otium) incurred by Augustine’s ordination and promotion to bishop would put an end to Augustine’s ideal of otium honestum (honorable leisure).

**Hippo: Critical Point**

Augustine, however, reveals Augustine’s abandonment of otium honestum, where what is honestum slowly comes to be defined on Christian terms. The traditional language of aristocratic otium provides a vocabulary with which Augustine can begin to redefine his new lifestyle, both to his would-be patrons, his philosophical friends, and even to himself. The stark change from Cassiacum & Thagaste to Hippo, however, reveals Augustine’s abandonment of otium honestum as a viable lifestyle for Christian like himself.

**Conclusion**

What is most crucial is the very thing that we cannot measure, Augustine’s “inner orientation”. From his changed orientation, philosophers like Augustine change what it means to do philosophy from the inside and out. We see this most clearly in his appropriation of otium honestum, where what is honestum slowly comes to be defined on Christian terms. The traditional language of aristocratic otium provides a vocabulary with which Augustine can begin to redefine his new lifestyle, both to his would-be patrons, his philosophical friends, and even to himself.

**Bibliography**

All English translations are my own. Sources listed provide Latin sources: