

PATRONAGE

The family was the basic unit of Roman society, and the undisputed head of the family was the *pater*, the father. It was his duty to protect the welfare of those inferior to him—his wife and his children—and it was their duty, in turn, to show him total obedience and deference. The Latin word most often used to express this family relationship is *pietas*.³⁸ The state was the largest unit of Roman society, but the Romans had traditionally viewed membership in the state (the “public matter”)³⁹ as similar to membership in an extended family. As if to emphasize this analogy, the heads of the state, who were the aristocratic senators, were called *patres* (“fathers”). The title implies that the aristocrats’ relationship to the lower-class masses was assumed to be one of paternal care in which they exercised control but with a kindly, fatherly concern. And since they accepted it as their duty to devote their time, energy, and money to the welfare of those inferior to them—the lower-class masses—and to provide public services without pay, they demanded in return gratitude, submission, and veneration. In the imperial period the head of the state was the emperor, who was called the *pater patriae* (“father of the fatherland”). Once again, *pietas* is the word that best describes the ideal relationship between the rulers and the ruled in the Roman state. In practice, of course, the relationship was seldom ideal. The senatorial *patres* frequently put their own welfare ahead of that of the common people and viewed the masses as troublesome children, as naive, uneducated, immature, and inferior beings who needed constant guidance. This arrogant and scornful attitude is quite evident in Cicero’s discussion of aristocracy which appears above.

Another type of paternalistic relationship existed in Roman society. An individual might ask someone better educated and more powerful than himself for advice and protection. In return, he became a retainer and provided various services for his protector. The retainer was called a *cliens* (“client”), and his protector was called a

they might be condemned to the mines. By the second century A.D., however, execution was allowed for *humiliores*. Thus *humiliores*, though Roman citizens, were in this respect treated the same as noncitizens.

³⁷Expulsion (Latin *relegatio*) meant banishment but no loss of citizenship.

³⁸On *pietas*, see the introduction to selection I.

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37 Expulsion (Latin *relegatio*) meant banishment but no loss of citizenship. 38 On *pietas*, see the introduction to selection 1.

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patronus ("patron"). The *cliens* depended on his *patronus* for assistance in a variety of matters. In ancient Rome, the patronage system often accomplished for the lower classes what a regular police force and social welfare programs do in our own society. Moreover, client-patron associations sometimes extended through several generations of the same families, with upper-class sons "inheriting" clients (and sons of clients) from their fathers. The Roman upper class and lower class were thus bound to one another in relationships that emphasized deference and obsequiousness on the part of many toward a few. The patronage system was one of the most deep-rooted and pervasive aspects of ancient Roman society. It has endured into modern Italian society where a *padrone* or "godfather" offers protection and assistance to those less wealthy and powerful than himself, and in turn acquires a "clientele" of loyal supporters.

Patrician and Plebeian

In the period of the monarchy, patrons were members of the patrician families.⁴⁰ The following passage describes the various duties of both the patrician patrons and their plebeian clients. The establishment of the patronage system was attributed by Roman historians to Romulus, the legendary founder and first king of Rome. In actual fact, we cannot ascertain the precise origins of the patronage system in Rome.

7

FIRA 1, p. 4 (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.9–10)

After Romulus had distinguished the more powerful members of society from the less powerful, he then set up laws and established what things were to be done by each of the two groups. The patricians were to serve as priests and magistrates, lawyers and judges. The plebeians were to till the land, herd livestock, and work for wages as craftsmen, tradesmen, and laborers. Romulus entrusted the plebeians to the protection of the patricians, but permitted each plebeian to choose for his patron any patrician whom he himself wished. This system is called patronage.

Romulus then established these rules about patronage. It was the duty of the patricians to explain the laws to their clients, to bring suits on their behalf if they were wronged or injured, and to defend them against prosecutors. . . .

It was unlawful and unholy for patricians and clients to bring suit against one another, to testify against one another in court, or to vote against the other. If anyone was convicted of some such misdeed, he was guilty under the law of treason and could be executed.

Patrons and Clients in Republican Rome

By the middle of the republican period, not only patricians were patrons. As some plebeian families gained power and wealth, they were in a position to become patrons. Most patrons were of senatorial rank and devoted their lives to the advancement of their own political careers. They provided free legal and business assistance to their clients but, in return, expected their clients to work for their political campaigns, to vote for them, and to appear with them in public as faithful retainers.⁴¹ A

⁴⁰The words *patron* and *patrician* both evolved from the same root as the word *pater*, "father."

⁴¹In selection 262, Cicero's brother states that a candidate's clients must accompany him from his house to the Forum every day. If they are unable to attend him, they must send a substitute.

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patron who won elections and court cases would presumably be better able to help his clients and would attract even more clients. Thus the size of one's retinue became an important indication of one's success as a public figure. A man surrounded by many clients appeared more powerful than a man accompanied by only a few.

8

Cicero, *Speech in Defense of Murena* 70, 71

Men of the lower class have only one way of either earning or repaying favors from our class, and that is by working on our political campaigns and following us around. . . . This constant attendance, which we have come to expect for men who are honorable and generous, is an appropriate activity for friends who are of a lower class and not busy. . . . Allow these men, who hope to gain everything from us, to have something which they can give us in return. . . . As they themselves often say, they cannot plead cases for us, or pledge security, or invite us to their homes. Yet they ask all these things from us, and they think that the favors which they receive from us can be repaid by their service.

Patrons and Clients in Imperial Rome

The patronage system had originated as a relationship between free citizens. However, slaves who were given their freedom became clients of their former owners, who then became their patrons. By the early imperial period many clients were not native Romans and did not view the patron-client relationship in the same way as a native Roman might. Many retained a servile posture toward their former owners. In particular, freedpersons who had been born and raised in the eastern part of the Mediterranean before their enslavement frequently viewed the role of client as that of sycophant. In the imperial period, moreover, when popular elections were abolished, the opportunities for political campaigning were severely curtailed, and clients, who had once fulfilled their obligations to their patrons by supporting their campaigns, now sought other ways of maintaining the relationship. The term *client* was sometimes synonymous with *flatterer* or *parasite*. Clients flocked to a patron's house in the morning to salute him.⁴² They clustered around him all day, fawning and currying favor, hoping not for legal assistance as much as for a gift, an allowance, an invitation to dinner, or an inheritance. In the passage translated here, Seneca, writing in the first century A.D., laments the changes which have occurred in the patronage system.

9

Seneca the Younger, *Letters* 19.4

Clients, you say? Not one of them waits upon you, but rather what he can get out of you. Once upon a time, clients sought a politically powerful friend; now they seek loot. If a lonely old man changes his will, his morning visitor goes to someone else's door.

⁴²The salute (Latin *salutatio*, from the verb *salutare* = "to greet, salute, pay respects") was a formal reception held usually in the morning. Clients gathered at the home of their patron to bid him good morning. See selection 143.

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