

PERSONAL PATRONAGE
UNDER THE
EARLY EMPIRE

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
LONDON NEW YORK ROCHELLE
MELBOURNE SYDNEY

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1982
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Saller, Richard P.

Personal patronage under the early empire

1. Patron and client

I. Title

937'.04 DG83.3 80-42226

ISBN 0 521 23300 3 hardback

ISBN 0 521 89392 5 paperback

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Introduction

Our study begins with a problem. Patronage is as difficult to define precisely as are other types of complex behavior, because it shares characteristics with other categories of relations into which it merges. The Roman use of the word *patronus* does not offer much help, for reasons discussed in the following chapter. Anthropologists who have studied the institution intensively in the context of the modern Mediterranean world have argued about a suitably exact definition which is not so broad as to be useless.¹ One specialist on the subject has offered the following definition: 'Patronage is founded on the reciprocal relations between patrons and clients. By patron I mean a person who uses his influence to assist and protect some other person, who becomes his "client", and in return provides certain services to his patron. The relationship is asymmetrical, though the nature of the services exchanged may differ considerably.'² Three vital elements which distinguish a patronage relationship appear in this passage. First, it involves the *reciprocal* exchange of goods and services. Secondly, to distinguish it from a commercial transaction in the marketplace, the relationship must be a personal one of some duration. Thirdly, it must be asymmetrical, in the sense that the two parties are of unequal status and offer different kinds of goods and services in the exchange — a quality which sets patronage off from friendship between equals.

Something recognizable as patronage, thus defined, appears in histories and monographs concerning the Principate, but it has not received a systematic treatment. Nor has it received more than scattered attention in the recent social histories of the early Empire. For instance, Ramsay MacMullen in his *Roman Social Relations* decided to exclude the subject from consideration, commenting that 'we need not repeat the investigations of other scholars at this level'.³ In his footnote two studies of the Empire reaching diametrically

1 E. Gellner, 'Patrons and clients', in *Patrons and Clients*, ed. E. Gellner and J. Waterbury, Ch. 1; Robert R. Kaufman, 'The patron-client concept and macro-politics: prospects and problems', *CSSH* 16 (1974), 287ff.

2 J. Boissevain, 'Patronage in Sicily', *Man* n.s. 1 (1966), 18. Kaufman, 'Patron-client concept', 285, offers a similar definition.

3 *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284*, 8.

opposed conclusions are cited without comment: de Ste Croix's examination of *suffragium* emphasizing the central importance of patronage during the Principate, and Harmand's monograph on *Le patronat* in which it is concluded that 'cette clientèle "privée", à forme individuelle, n'est pas plus qu'une relique sous l'Empire'.⁴ Harmand, on the basis of this conclusion, focuses exclusively on municipal patronage for the period of the Principate. His idea that personal patronage became insignificant during the early Empire to re-emerge in the form of rural patronage during the late Empire represents a commonly held view: in a recent textbook, reference can be found to 'un relâchement des liens personnels', and in the most extensive recent treatment of Roman imperial society, municipal patronage is said to have taken the place of the Republican type of personal patronage which underwent a 'réduction à l'insignifiance'.⁵

There is another group of studies which diverges from Harmand's and recognizes the continuing function of patron-client relations in imperial politics. Perhaps the best-known exponent of this position is R. Syme, who argues persuasively in his *Roman Revolution* that the emperor's position was based on patronal ties to his supporters: under Augustus 'political competition was sterilized and regulated through a pervasive system of patronage and nepotism'.⁶ Unlike some historians who see the role of patronage declining as other institutions of the Principate developed, Syme thinks it of continuing importance: in his *Tacitus* political history is written in terms of 'webs of intrigue for office and influence', 'secret influence', and 'managers of patronage'.⁷ A similar view is expressed in G. Alföldy's social history of Rome, in which the emperor's position as a great patron is recognized, as is the need of the *novus homo* for the support of well-placed aristocrats such as the younger Pliny.⁸ Alföldy's treatment of patronage seems to me a step in the right direction, but is too limited in the understanding of its function in Roman imperial society in several respects. As in most other works mentioning patronage, it is treated as an almost exclusively political phenomenon with a focus on the emperor. The social, economic, legal and ideological aspects receive little or no attention, and even the political side is not examined systematically (for instance, patronal support does not appear in the discussion of equestrian appointments).

A broader approach to patronage is taken by J. Michel in his *Gratuité en droit romain*. This book examines at length the ideology and the economic and

4 *Un aspect social et politique du monde romain: le patronat sur les collectivités des origines au Bas-Empire*, 467f. For discussion of de Ste Croix's views, see below p.3.

5 P. Petit, *La paix romaine*, 232; J. Gagé, *Les classes sociales dans l'Empire romain*, 77.

6 *The Roman Revolution*, 386.

7 *Tacitus*, 8, 55, 24.

8 *Römische Sozialgeschichte*, 105f.

social significance of reciprocal exchange during the Roman Republic.⁹ But for many of the same reasons expressed by other historians, Michel believes that the role of this exchange declined during the Empire, a decline which is reflected in the legal texts of the time.¹⁰

In my judgement the best analysis of personal patronage in the early Empire is to be found in G. E. M. de Ste Croix's article about *suffragium*. It is 'the growth of patronage', in his view, 'which provides the key to the working of the Roman constitution in the imperial period', for the reason that 'with the collapse of the Republic and the virtual elimination of the democratic features of the constitution in the last half-century B.C., patronage and clientship became as it were the mainspring of Roman public life'.¹¹ De Ste Croix considers the influence of *suffragium* on the allotment of offices and on legal hearings, and gives attention to the growth of its sale and its distribution at all levels of government. The brevity of de Ste Croix's remarks, however, invites a more complete description and analysis of the political and judicial aspects of the subject, as well as consideration of its many other facets.

This book is intended to contribute to the understanding of Roman imperial society in several ways. The systematic collection and presentation of the available evidence should make possible a sounder evaluation of the divergent claims about the place of patronage in imperial politics. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the importance of patronage extends beyond the realm of politics, just as in many Mediterranean societies today where the institution influences the ways in which people view their world, earn their living, associate with their fellow townsmen, and relate to the state administration.¹²

Demonstrating the mere existence of patron-client relationships in imperial Rome is of limited value, since they can be found in one form or another in most societies. It is much more valuable to know how patronage functioned in relation to other political, economic and social institutions. Function is more difficult to prove than existence, and so at times suggestions under this head will necessarily be tentative. For instance, lack of evidence makes it impossible to prove for imperial Rome a connection between strong patron-client ties and attitudes towards capital investment, such as has been observed in some better-documented societies.¹³ More can be said about the relationship between Roman government and patronage. Patrons supply protection and special access to certain goods and services for their clients; as state administrations expand, providing protection and services to all citizens on the basis of universal, impersonal criteria, the clients' need for patrons declines. A.

9 *Gratuité en droit romain*, espec. 503ff.

10 *Ibid.*, 553ff. See p.119 with n.2 below.

11 'Suffragium: from vote to patronage', *British Journal of Sociology* 5 (1954), 33, 40.

12 For the many facets of patronage, see the contributions in *Patrons and Clients*, ed. Gellner and Waterbury, and J. K. Campbell, *Honour, Family, and Patronage*.

13 See below, p.126.

Blok conceptualizes this interrelationship between government and patronage in a typology in which different kinds of states are related to the various functions which patronage performs. Blok singles out four types of states, characterized by vassalage, brokerage, friendship, and disguised patronage. These 'may be conceived of in terms of a continuum on which patronage and bureaucratization (i.e., centralized authority) "move" in opposite directions. One pole of this continuum is feudal society in which patronage is full-fledged: patron-client ties are the dominant social relations which have a clear public face, while bureaucratic authority is near to zero. On the other pole, authority is fully centralized; patronage is dysfunctional and is likely to be absent'.¹⁴ The two intermediate types, characterized by brokerage and friendship, are most relevant to the study of the Roman Empire. The former is often found in segmented societies where sections of the population are not yet fully integrated into the state by direct contact with government. Thus broker-patrons are left to mediate between the central administration and the people in gaps where no formal administration exists to perform the tasks. In the state characterized by friendship, on the other hand, an extensive central organization exists and the patron's main task becomes that of expediting contact with the bureaucracy. These two types are distinguished according to whether patronage operates in place of state machinery or 'lubricates' machinery that exists by offering preferential treatment to those who have effective patrons. Blok also suggests that the language and ideology of patronage vary along the same continuum. At the feudal end, patronage has 'a clear public face' and the language of patronage does not carry immoral or unethical implications; at the opposite end of the continuum, 'patronage is a bad word' so that 'in public neither the patron nor the client is allowed to refer to his mutual contacts, let alone take pride in maintaining these relationships...'.¹⁵

There would be little point in devoting a great deal of space in this book to categorizing the Roman state of the Principate: pure ideal types rarely occur in history and attempts at categorizing are often futile. But it seems to me that Blok's typology throws much light on the issue of the function of patronage vis-à-vis the state and allows us to pose a central question more clearly. In much work on the growing bureaucracy of the Principate it is assumed or argued that the Roman state moved some considerable distance along the continuum toward fully centralized authority which eliminated or minimized

14 'Variations in patronage', *Sociologische Gids* 16 (1969), 365-78. The historical example closest to the ideal type of fully centralized authority is probably modern Scandinavia. It has been pointed out to me that the word 'patronage' cannot be translated into the Swedish or Norwegian languages. Kaufman, 'Patron-client concept', 290, prefers not to allow feudal relations under the heading of patron-client relations, but this does not seem to me to detract from the value of Blok's continuum.

15 Blok, 'Variations in patronage', 373.

the importance of patronage. Further, it is argued that concurrently the ideology changed so that patronage became an evil to be suppressed, losing its 'clear public face' of the Republic.¹⁶ This position is examined in the first chapter on language and ideology. During the Republic patron-client relations, far from being thought an evil, were reinforced by law and religious mores. Did this ideology change during the rule of the emperors? In order to answer the question, the social roles (e.g., emperor, administrative official) which the patronal ideal continued to shape will be considered. The remaining chapters will examine the web of patron-client relationships, beginning with the emperor and his court and moving out through the imperial aristocracy to the provinces. At each level the recurring issue of the impact of the growing bureaucracy on patronage will arise in the form of the question: to what extent did the state change from a brokerage to a friendship type, with patronage functioning only as a 'lubricant' for the newly created administrative machinery?

Finally, an explicit statement about method may serve as a useful preliminary to what follows. The theme of patronage looms large in recent studies of contemporary Mediterranean societies.¹⁷ Of course, the historian of antiquity who wishes to examine similar phenomena faces the problem that he does not enjoy the same opportunities for observation: the examples of patron-client bonds to be found in the literature from the Principate are scattered and not enough is known about any of them. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to indirect approaches in addition to the accumulation of specific examples. The first of these is a word study. Explicit statements about how patrons and clients should behave are not common in our texts and are to be treated with care when they are encountered. The fact that they are self-conscious and often philosophical means that they may be as unrepresentative of the ideas and expectations of men in everyday life as a sermon preached from a pulpit today. A study of the contexts and connotations of key words may be more revealing, and so a word study of patronage-related words is offered in Chapter 1.

The ancient historian rarely has enough data to prove by simple induction that a particular kind of social behavior was typical rather than the exception. For instance, several or even a dozen cases of patronal influence on the appointment of officials do not prove that such influence normally played a part. This obstacle to generalization can be overcome in several ways. One is a sensitivity to the expectations of the writer and people involved: do they write or act as if influence was an essential factor in securing offices? Even expectations can sometimes be misleading. Another indirect approach is to ask what alternatives to patronage were available for securing appointments. It

16 See below, p.79.

17 An extensive bibliography can be found in *Patrons and Clients*, ed. Gellner and Waterbury.

has been widely suggested that senatorial and equestrian careers became highly structured during the second century, with the result that the emperor's discretion was normally very limited and patronal influence of little value. Much of Chapter 3 is devoted to a critique of this position, on the grounds that if careers were not highly regulated personal influence was more likely to have been decisive in the vast majority of appointments for which no positive evidence is available.

A third indirect approach utilized here is comparative analysis.¹⁸ The body of anthropological material on patronage has grown enormously over the past few decades.¹⁹ I cannot claim to have read all of it, but I have looked at a great deal concerned with modern Mediterranean cultures and have found it useful in several respects. The ongoing discussion and debate among anthropologists have produced new and more sophisticated analyses of patronage, some of which suggest new questions and ways of analyzing the evidence of the Roman world. Studies of the Turkish Empire, to take one example, indicate a link between the quality of provincial administration and the integration of officials and their subject populations in the same patronage networks — a link which is worth considering for the Roman Empire. In addition, knowledge of patronage and bureaucracy in other states should give us a better perspective on the government of the Principate. For those who are uncomfortable with Blok's ideal types, comparison with other pre-industrial states, such as China or early modern European countries, can provide some standard by which to measure the significance of patronage and the extent of bureaucratization at Rome. A monograph on a particular social institution inevitably runs the risk of presenting an unbalanced view by overemphasizing the subject under study. This is especially true when our evidence is so inadequate: for instance, how could a Roman historian possibly measure with any precision the relative influence of patronage vis-à-vis wealth on social mobility with the information available? Knowledge of better-known societies cannot tell us what we do not know about Rome, but it can at least indicate realistic possibilities for the place of patron-client relationships in Roman society.

18 A critique of the uses of comparative analysis can be found in William H. Sewell, Jr, 'Marc Bloch and the logic of comparative history', *History and Theory* 6 (1967), 206ff.

19 A recent lengthy bibliography can be found in the notes of S. N. Eisenstadt and L. Roniger, 'Patron-client relations as a model of structuring social exchange', *CSSH* 22 (1980), 42-77.