

Clientela, Roman Republic

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Patron–client relations were among the most fundamental and oldest relations in Roman society. They bound common folk to the rich and powerful in a personal relationship based on mutual trust and solidarity. The concept of *clientela* denoted both this relation between a patron and his clients and the group of clients who were in his care and protection (*patrocinium*). Clients were free, but not necessarily freeborn. Originally, the Latin word *cliens* probably denoted someone who “harkened to” another (*cluens*), or someone who “tended to” another (*colens*, cf. Serv. on *Aen.* 6.609). Patron–client relations were voluntary relations based on the exchange of gifts and favors expressing trust/loyalty (*fides*), reciprocity/gratitude (*gratia*), goodwill (*benignitas*), and affection. A client was said to be in his patron’s trust (*in fide*, Cic. *Rosc. Am.* 93).

Clientela resembled friendship (*amicitia*), but differed from it ideologically. Roman friendship was ideally based on equality and the exchange of more or less equally valued gifts and favors. Patron–client relations were those of dependence between unequal partners in which protection (*praesidium*) and deference (*obsequium*) were offered as part of a package exchange of unequally valued gifts and favors (Ampelius *Mem.* 49.3). Ideologically, the main contribution of clients to the relation with their patron was the symbolic enhancement of the latter’s social status, while in return they received various kinds of substantial support. Ideally, clients were more closely attached than friends to the household (*domus*) of their patron (Gell. *NA* 5.13.1–6).

However, in practice, friendship and patronage merged into each other (cf. Cic. *Rosc. Am.* 106). *Amicitia* was vague enough to encompass patron–client relations when the social status of the partners was roughly comparable.

The language of friendship was commonly used to denote patron–client relations. The difference was a matter of public classification and avowal, but classification depended on perception, and avowal was subject to social pressure and not altogether voluntary.

From a sociological perspective, *clientela* may be described as a typical patronage relation or system based on reciprocity and gift-exchange, resembling lop-sided instrumental friendship. As such, it may be compared to patronage in other cultures and periods. However, Roman and Greek authors expressly distinguished Roman *clientela* from dependence relations in other cultures (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.9: Athenian *pelatai*, Thessalian *penestai*). Greek texts use the Latin loan-word *patroneia* to describe Roman patronage. It was ascribed a mythical origin (see below) and idiosyncratic obligations. *Clientela* thus emerges as a distinctly Roman cultural construct.

Symbolic acts and gifts prescribed by custom were a strong component of *clientela*. In the morning, clients went to their patron to pay their respect (*salutatio*) and they accompanied him to the forum (*adsectatio*). Conversely, patrons invited their clients to dinner or, when the social distance was too great, gave them little hand gifts (*sportulae*). Originally these were gifts in kind, but by the Late Republic, clients mostly received a small sum of money instead. On the Saturnalia, clients sent candles and fired clay puppets as gifts to their patrons (Macrob. *Sat.* 1.7.33; Varro, *L.L.* 64). The repetitiveness of such customary symbolic acts and gifts added a ritualistic dimension to patron–client relations.

Clientela was believed to have been important already under the Kings. Later tradition ascribed the institution to Romulus (most fully Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.9–10; Plut. *Rom.* 13). The word *patrocinium* (patronage) would have been derived from a companion of Evander, Patron, who was renowned as protector of the common people. The TWELVE TABLES severely punished deceit (*fraus*) by a patron of his client

by declaring the patron an outlaw (*sacer*). The meaning of the term *fraus*, however, was disputed already in antiquity. It may have dealt only with fraud in court (*praevaricatio*, Serv. 6.609), rather than with breach of faith in general.

Modern scholars (most notably Mommsen and von Premerstein) have long considered archaic *clientela* as a formal dependency relation sanctioned by customary law between a patrician and a plebeian, similar to the patron–freedman relation. *Clientela* would have started with *deditio* (formal surrender of an enemy), *applicatio* (a ritual attachment rite), or *commendatio* whereby a patron “transferred” his client to another patron. The *clientela* bond would have been absolute, exclusive, and hereditary, binding families rather than individuals. Clients and freedmen would have constituted a class of semi-free serfs. Gradually, by the Middle Republic, this highly structured bond would have evolved into a more informal voluntary relation. However, many traditional features were preserved as moral rules sanctioned by public opinion, putting the reputation and honor of patrons and clients at stake.

It is now recognized that this view is irreconcilable with the developing citizen state described in historical tradition. The traditional view of the Early Republic depicts clients as free citizens with full political and civil rights. Apart from the sanction against patrons committing *fraus*, the law of the Twelve Tables made no provisions for clients or patrons. Whether a more absolute form of *clientela* existed before the emergence of the citizen state cannot be made out.

Later texts provide no trace of a formal initiation procedure. Patron–client relations in PLAUTUS and TERENCE start with the acceptance of a gift or favor, which the recipient could not return. This turned the recipient into a client “bound by favors” to his new patron (*beneficiis devinctus*, Plaut. *Rud.* 893; Ter. *Ad.* 456; cf. Hor. *Epist.* 1.7.46–95). A prospective client could be introduced by a recommendation “into

the trust (*fides*)” of the prospective patron, but it was left to the discretion of the would-be patron and client to follow up the introduction.

In the Late Republic, patron–client relations differed from patron–freedman relations. The latter were involuntary and subject to legal regulations. The view held by Mommsen that freedmen in archaic Rome remained under the absolute control of their patrons has been rejected (Brunt 1988: 407–8; Waldstein 1986: 42–79). Legal regulations regarding patron–freedman relations probably developed only in the second century BCE. Freedmen may have entered the *clientela* of their former masters in archaic Rome if they so desired, but manumission in itself did not initiate a patron–client bond.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* 2.10) lists obligations and prohibitions supposedly instituted by Romulus. Patrons had to assist and protect their clients in all legal and financial matters. Clients had to assist their patrons in paying dowries, ransom money, fines, and political expenses. This envisaged exchange of primarily legal assistance for primarily financial assistance in fact reflects expectations in the Middle and Late Republic.

Furthermore, it would have been impious and unlawful for patrons and clients to litigate or testify against each other or to support each other’s enemies. The guilty party was declared “a victim devoted to Infernal Jupiter,” making him an outlaw to be killed with impunity (probably a reflection of the rule of the XII Tables punishing *fraus* by patrons). A late second-century BCE corruption law (*lex repetundarum*) excluded patrons and clients and their descendents as advocates for the prosecution and provided an exemption for patrons and clients to be summoned as witnesses for the prosecution (*FIRA* I, no 7. § 10; 32–3). The law on election fraud (*lex de ambitu*), under which Gaius MARIUS was tried in 116, contained a similar clause (Plut. *Mar.* 5, 4; cf. Cato *ORF* 200). Significantly, these laws ruled that patrons and clients could not be

ordered to testify against each other, but did not exclude them as witnesses.

Court patronage was a traditional core-duty of patrons, but the connection between patronage *sensu largo* and court patronage became blurred in the Middle Republic. Already in 204 BCE the Cincian law on gifts (*lex Cincia de donis et muneribus*) forbade court patrons to accept gifts from their clients. The law carried no sanctions, but confirmed the impropriety of such conduct and provided the client with an exception (*exceptio*) against accusations in court if the “gift” had been contractually agreed upon. Nevertheless, the link was never wholly severed. Court patrons could sometimes be bought (cf. Ps.-Sall. *Cic.* 5.1; Gell. *NA* 12.12), but traditional patrons could never honorably refuse to defend their clients in court. At least rhetorically, court patronage created a bond which could serve as an excuse to request later favors. P. Vatinius, whom Cicero defended in 54 BCE, described himself as “your client” in a letter to Cicero to request support for a triumph (*Cic. Fam.* 5.9.1; see CICERO, MARCUS TULLIUS).

Ancient authors consistently present *clientela* as an integral part of Roman politics since the Early Republic. There is no reason to doubt that patricians and plebeian nobles used clients to build political power bases in the context of the developing citizen state. Clients financed political expenses, solicited and provided votes in electoral and legislative assemblies, supplied a visibly enthusiastic entourage for political candidates, and generally enhanced a politician’s status. Whether *clientelae* ever sufficed to control popular assemblies is doubtful. The political role of clients changed in the Late Republic. Increased competition among senators, the growing size of the citizen body, the introduction of the secret ballot, and the increased importance of oratory and money in politics made popular assemblies volatile and hard to control. C. Gracchus reputedly first formed mass *clientelae* as a political weapon (*Sen. Ben.* 6.34.2), but both Gracchi are also eminent examples of politicians

relying on oratory and social policy (grain and land laws) to win popular support (see GRACCHUS, TIBERIUS AND GAIUS SEMPRONIUS). Quintus Cicero’s essay on electoral campaigning (*Commentariolum Petitionis*) has a lot to say about social networking, but very little about traditional *clientelae* (see CICERO, QUINTUS TULLIUS). Clients provided reliable supporters and were crucial for image building and career moves in the Late Republic, but to force major decisions in the Senate or the voting assemblies, they were no match for bribery, oratory, the charisma of military glory, and real or imagined interests. CLODIUS PULCHER tried to use *clientela* to attach *collegia* (private voluntary associations) to his person. These would serve as militias to pressure opponents and force popular assemblies (Benner 1987). But even he relied on popular policy issues conveyed by mass oratory to gain his points. His militias were soon thwarted by similar gangs organized by his opponents.

The economic dimension of *clientela* increased in the second and first century BCE. Opportunities for businessmen increased in the new provinces and protectorates. But business ventures among provincial and foreign communities required protection from Roman officials (Deniaux 1993: 207–86, cf. *Cic. Fam.* 7.29). Money-lending to kings, tribes, and cities in particular was lucrative but highly risky. Businessmen needed letters of recommendation and active support from patrons. Provincial offices as legate and prefect were highly sought after, and easily obtained by businessmen with influential patrons. Conversely, the immense fortunes gathered by the political elite in the Late Republic required complex managerial skills, which only experienced businessmen could offer. The result was the emergence of a group of “affairistes”, half business friends, half clients of topsenators (Verboven 2002: 227–74; see *Cic. Fam.* 7.29.2, letter of the businessman M. Curius from Patrae to Cicero: *amice magne . . . patrone mi*).

Literary patronage (see PATRONAGE, LITERARY) – whereby clients offered works of art in

exchange for protection and support (both material and symbolic) – goes back to the third century BCE. An early example is ENNIUS, who was patronized by CATO THE ELDER, SCIPIO AFRICANUS, and Fulvius Nobilior. The playwright Terence enjoyed the support of SCIPIO AEMILIANUS. The rise of literary patronage was related to the growing importance of literary culture in Rome. Poets, playwrights, rhetoricians, philosophers, and other artists and intellectuals enhanced the prestige of their patrons. Talented authors rose above the level of “ordinary” clients (Gold 1982). As in the case of businessmen, *clientela* and friendship overlapped in the case of literary patronage (see Porph. *Ad Hor. Epod.* 1).

Patron–client relations were by definition relations between superiors and inferiors. But this hierarchy was valid only for patron and client *vis à vis* each other. Even senators could be considered clients of more powerful *nobiles*, although members of the elite abhorred the idea of being in another’s patronage and although relations involving senators and knights were expressed in terms of friendship rather than patronage. To accept gifts or favors that one could not return always carried the risk of being labeled a client (Cic. *Off.* 2.69; cf. Sen. *Ben.* 2.23.1–3). When accused for electoral fraud, Marius was indignant when C. Herennius refused to testify against him on the grounds that Marius’ family had since long been clients of the Herennii. However, Plutarch commented that only a curule office could end hereditary clientship (Plut. *Mar.* 5.4).

Common clients, who openly avowed their position and were labeled accordingly, were mostly non-aristocrats. However, the truly poor and destitute did not qualify as clients, because they had nothing to give in return for gifts and favors received (cf. Plautus *Men.* 574–7). “Lower-class” clients in fact belonged to the “middling class” (*plebs media*), who had regular incomes allowing some extras, but not enough to stop working.

Not only individuals and families, but also communities, cities, and tribes could be in the *clientela* of a Roman patron. Foreign

communities and Italian cities alike needed protectors in Rome to defend their interests in political and legal affairs. Patrons would assume this role: they introduced ambassadors to the Senate, spoke on their behalf, represented client communities in court, and generally exerted their influence on their clients’ behalf (cf. *Bell. Hisp.* 42). In return, the client communities enhanced their patron’s status, provided character witnesses in court, extended hospitality to their patron, offered refuge, and generally provided support. The choice of a community’s patron had to be made by the highest political authority. In the case of city states, it was the local senate (*boule, curia*) or the popular assembly which made the decision. The choice would normally be based on previous experiences with the prospective patron (i.e., administrative contacts). In most cases, the co-optation was extended to the patron’s children and descendents.

Cicero considered it ancestral custom that conquered cities and nations came in the patronage of their conquerors (Cic. *Off.* 1.35). The classic example is the patronage of the Claudii Marcelli over the Sicilians (Livy 25.29.6; 32.7–8; Cic. *Verr.* 2.3.45; 4.89–90). Von Premerstein incorrectly proposed that unconditional surrender or *editio in fide* (“surrender in trust”) automatically made the victorious general patron. However, surrender was normally “in the trust of the Roman people” (*in fide populi romani*), not in that of the conquering general. Conquest paved the way to patronage in some cases, but the close link suggested by Cicero does not predate the third century BCE and was no longer real in his own time (Eilers 2002: 38–60). It has more to do with the myth of patronage than with patronage as a social and political reality.

Related to the myth of patronage is the view of Rome itself as patron of its empire. Cicero claimed that Rome held its empire through benefactions, so that it could be called patronage (*patrocinium*) rather than empire (*imperium*) (Cic. *Off.* 2.26–7, cf. Livy 34.58.11; 37.54.17). The language of patronage is here used in a metaphorical sense, but the metaphor is

revealing for the ideological construct laid upon Rome's international relations. It implied that Rome was and should be an unselfish protector of her "allies," who in return owed her allegiance and loyalty. It entitled both parties to foster and express expectations regarding each other's conduct, justifying certain actions and condemning others. *Clientela* in this respect was not a relation, but an "emic" system providing meaning to otherwise hard to categorize relations.

SEE ALSO: *Amicitia*; Cicero, Marcus Tullius; Client kings; *Fides*; Freedmen and freedwomen; Friendship; Guest-friendship (*hospitium*); Honor-shame culture; Patron, patronage, Roman; Patronage, literary.

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