

Networking

Political decisions – both in the senate and in the legislative assemblies – were based on personal, long-term obligations. I'll help you if you help me – personal favours were a common practice. Such obligations survived over generations.

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Representing the people

Although, generally speaking, Roman magistrates were democratically elected officials, they were not representatives of the people as we understand them today.



Suisse Federal Council, 2014. Photo: Wikicommons / Swiss Federal Council / Dominic Büttner/Béatrice Devènes.

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Wheeling and dealing

One characteristic feature of Roman-Republican politics was nepotism, also referred to as 'backscratching' or 'wheeling and dealing'. While today's citizens and voters react with indignation, when office-holders manipulate political decisions by secret agreements and backroom deals, such practices were both common and accepted in ancient Rome. Every individual was linked to a number of other individuals in a network of dependencies.



Joseph ('Sepp') Blatter, FIFA President. Photo: Wikicommons / Antonio Cruz/ABr / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/br/deed.en>

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That did not only hold true for senate and legislative assemblies. Each Roman citizen was in turn enmeshed in a net of responsibilities. So, wives were obliged to obey their husbands, children their parents and slaves their owners.



Playground climbin net, Munich. Photo: Wikicommons / Mummelgrummel / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.de>

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Freed, but not quite free

Such relationships of dependence and obedience could not simply be broken off. Even after a slave had been granted freedom, he was still bound to serve his former master (patronus) as a so called client and observe his wishes. This relationship was also transferred to the next generations.



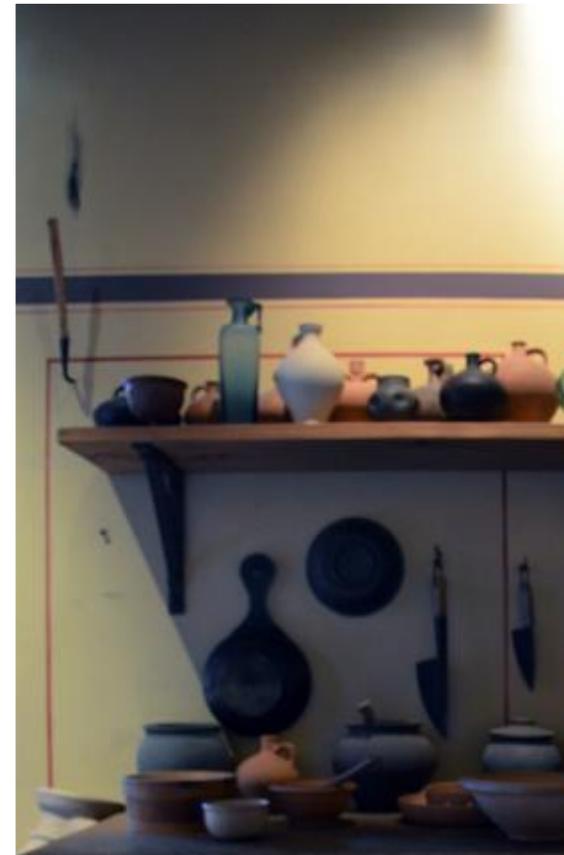
Roman tomb relief of a freed slave and his family. Vatican Museums, Rome. Photo: Wikicommons / Agnete / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.de>

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Poor devils

Clients, however, were not necessarily always former slaves. Free Romans in need could also subject themselves to patrons as clients. In exchange, they received food and, if necessary, legal aid.



Kitchen of a reconstructed Roman domus, Römermuseum Augst/Switzerland. Photo: Wikicommons / Carole Raddato/Markus Cyron / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.de>

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Obligation is mutual

In return, clients owed their patrons respect and kept them company in public. Moreover, they paid their respects every morning in the atrium of their masters' house (*salutatio*). In reality, most patrons' houses would host many more clients (all male) than Gustave Boulanger imagined in this somewhat romanticised painting.



'The Flute Concert', painting by Gustave Boulanger, 1860. Musée national du château de Versailles. Photo: Wikipedia / Acacia 217/Base Joconde.

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The sportula – a gift basket for friends and clients

The best time for the clients to ask for favours and help from their senatorial patrons was when they visited them each morning. It was not unusual for the small people to receive gifts, loans or a dinner invitation on this occasion. At a later date, aristocratic citizens preferred to keep to themselves and merely saved the leftovers from the previous night for their clients, which they packed in a small basket, the sportula. By the 1st century AD, it seems that even this tradition had become too effortful and the sportula been replaced by a fixed sum of about 6 sestertii – an impersonal allowance for the morning visit.



A typical sportula might have looked like this.

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The big picture

This seemingly private relationship between patron and client became a matter of political consequence as soon as clients were obliged to vote for their patron's favoured candidate – or the candidate that their patron was in turn obliged to in return.



Urn, used as voting box, 19th century. Stadtmuseum Rottweil. Photo: Wikicommons / FA2010.

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Clients by the score

The Romans knew one very simple, but universal principle: If you did someone a favour, he owed you one. If you accepted a favour, you owed him one. This unspoken rule of mutual obligation was so omnipresent in Roman culture and such a vital part of their mentality that military commanders would turn entire peoples into clients after victorious battles.



Augustus paying his respects to Herod the Great. Illustration from 'Antiquities of the Jews' by Flavius Josphehus (anonymyous translation), Jean Bourdichon, around 1470. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Source: Wikicommons / <http://mandragore.bnf.fr/> BnF NAF 21013.

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From soldiers to loyal clients

Veterans were settled on the newly conquered lands and became their patrons' loyal clients. Thus, a general who had fought in the name of Rome, could gain considerable influence not to be taken lightly by the Roman government.



Joseph Ambrose, 86-year-old World War I veteran, attends the dedication day parade for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982. Photo: Wikicommons / U.S. Census Bureau/Petaholmes.

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Patronage carried to extremes

In the end, the omnipresent patronage system led to the collapse of the Roman political system. The system worked as long as there was a balance between the individual groups. However, as soon as one of those groups outbalanced the other due to the conquest of oversized lands, the office-holder suddenly held enough power to throw the system out of balance. Ultimately, that was the reason behind the civil war between Caesar and the senate.



Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Replica of an unknown painting. Source: Wikicommons / Wolpertinger.