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Gerding, Henrik

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# Public building and clientage

Social and political aspects of Roman building industry

By Henrik Gerding

## Introduction

**D**URING THE ENTIRE Roman period the public sector was relatively small and public expenses few in number.<sup>1</sup> By the turn of the era the army represented the single largest cost in the state finances. Besides that, governmental expenses also included costs for the grain supply (*annona*), the administration and, to a lesser degree, public games and festivals. However, there was another major item within state economy: public building. The magnitude of public building and its direct influence on all levels of society made it a potential instrument for governmental control over local politics and economy. Was this possibility ever consciously exploited and, if so, in what ways? In this paper a heuristic model is presented, where Roman building during the late Republic and early Principate is discussed within the framework of patronage–clientage. Various implications of the model are briefly explored and some possible lines of investigation suggested.

## The significance of free labour

Who built Rome? Or rather, to which social group did the general work force within Roman building industry belong? This question has been thoroughly discussed by Lionel Casson and P.A. Brunt, each representing opposing views. According to Casson public works in Rome were carried out by slave gangs owned or hired by the state,<sup>2</sup> whereas Brunt has argued that day-labourers were employed, casual workers recruited among the free population. In his view the common people in the city of Rome had to earn much of their living in casual employment, partly for instance in the unloading and portage of goods that arrived by sea, partly in the building trade.<sup>3</sup> Over the years the latter standpoint has gained the strongest support.<sup>4</sup>

The ancient building industry, as well as agriculture and transport, needed large quantities of unskilled labour. However, since these sectors were seasonal, or in other ways varied in intensity over time, the demand for labour fluctuated heavily. Slaves constituted both a significant initial investment and a regular expenditure in food, clothes and housing. Hired labour, on the other hand, produced a cost only for the duration of the particular work at hand. The strict implementation of this logic would suggest that slaves were used for continuous and constant work (e.g. pottery production and maintenance of aqueducts),<sup>5</sup> or as a minimum work force which could be expanded at need and thus provided a ready-made frame for the organisation. Of course, many slaves were also valued for the professional, sometimes rare, skills they possessed, or were specially trained to perform qualified work. An employer would be reluctant to pay for this training if he or she could not be sure to benefit from it for at least some time. Consequently, free labour would be preferred when it concerned unskilled work carried out on a day-to-day basis. This was the case within building industry, but also in agriculture where we can envisage the proletariat of the cities periodically migrating into the countryside to work with the harvest as day-labourers.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to the commonly expressed view that the urban plebs had no assets, no credit and therefore no debts, Z. Yavetz has argued that they did suffer from a considerable monetary burden – rents.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it has been shown that the urban free poor could not physically have survived on the grain dole (*frumentationes*) and donations (*congiaria*) alone, and must have found other sources of income – casual labour.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, large public building projects feeding a large number of workers and their families should perhaps be regarded as just another kind of *congiarium*. Janet DeLaine has successfully demonstrated this through her meticulous study on the construction of the baths of Caracalla.<sup>9</sup> Almost 80% of the expenditure on the baths was spent on the work force, and this could very well have substituted other forms of imperial handouts.

### Public building as a governmental instrument

After the Punic wars in the 3rd century BC, Roman internal politics were increasingly defined by fierce competition amongst the élite and a strongly interventionist foreign policy, both of which fuelled continuous warfare

and a predatory economy. During the Principate one of the most important aims of the Roman civilian and military administration was to make sure that Imperial authority was upheld and that the landed classes (both Roman and provincial) could pursue their (economic) interests without disruption. Order and stability were prerequisites for the collection of taxes, among other things, and manifested itself in the concept of *pax Romana*. At the same time, both administration and state bureaucracy were kept to a minimum, mainly by the use of *locatio–conductio* whereby governmental affairs (including tax collecting) were let out to contractors (*redemptores*), or delegated to local actors.

The complexity of the Roman economy and the degree of monetisation have often been the subject of intense debate. According to some scholars, the minting of coins was only motivated by the desire to facilitate the payment of state expenditures and the collecting of taxes.<sup>10</sup> Still, it has been argued that the Roman government concerned itself with the problem of how to get coins into circulation at all levels of society. According to Keith Hopkins, the Roman state had no mechanism for distributing coin, other than by state expenditure.<sup>11</sup> This alternative was heavily restricted by the limited size of the public sector and the small number of state expenses. The military costs were at times enormous but offered little flexibility as a means of coin distribution due to the geographic concentration of the legions. Hopkins' own solution to the problem is that the flow of money taxes and of tax-stimulated trade redistributed state-issued silver coins.<sup>12</sup> This is in all probability true, but it may be that the significance of state intervention has been underestimated.<sup>13</sup> Major public building and infrastructure programs could be directed to any part of the empire and involved all levels of society. The system of day-wages contributed to the rapid spread of coins and thus to the monetisation of the economy. That the lower urban classes were paid day-wages is supported by the fact that the same people probably also had to pay their rents on a daily basis.<sup>14</sup>

The raising of public buildings in Roman cities has often been discussed in terms of 'propaganda' and self-aggrandisement by way of euergetism. However, in most cases this only refers to the actual buildings; the splendid baths, the aqueducts and so on. We should also look at the building process itself and its economic consequences. It has already been suggested above that jobs offered at public building projects can be seen as a form of *congiarium*

comparable to the grain dole, but these projects could also have the effect of boosting the entire economy of a region.<sup>15</sup> We arrive at the fundamental question: Is it possible that public works were consciously used as an instrument of governmental control over the economy? This idea has often been rejected; the two major objections being the lack of outspoken evidence and the supposition that this kind of considerations are the product of modern economic theory.<sup>16</sup> Studies on the prevailing ideological view towards work in antiquity have also led to the conclusion that unemployment ‘was not a public concern.’<sup>17</sup> This may be true if looking at it as a question of welfare, but it might still have been an important factor in the relations between patrons and clients, where both parties had something to gain. This could also be a possible background to imperial implementation of building politics.

### Building, contracting and clientage

During the Roman Republic patronage–clientage was one of the cornerstones of society. The bond between patron and client influenced the fundamental workings of social, legal and political life, and it also appeared in the economic sphere. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that aspects of this phenomenon may have infiltrated many financial relations, for example that between a landlord and his tenants, or between a commissioner of a building project and his workers.<sup>18</sup> The latter example can be explained in two ways: a) the commissioner provides jobs to people who are thus put under obligation to him; b) the commissioner favours his own clients when distributing the work at hand, compelled by his responsibility as their patron. In our case, the difference is insignificant.<sup>19</sup> However, we should also look beyond the mere exchange of favours versus loyalty, as it would be in the patron’s interest to promote the economy within the community of his clientele; the stronger they are, the stronger he is.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, if the workers in question lived in tenement houses belonging to the commissioner and bought their meagre supplies in his stores, the money would soon find their way back into his pockets anyway.

What then if the relation between commissioner and workers was broken by the intermediacy of an entrepreneur or a contractor, who relied on his own work force? The arising situation would probably limit the practical possibilities of patronage to some extent, as the commissioner would no

longer exercise any direct control over the builders. On the other hand, two new relations are created where patronage might have come into play, i.e. those between commissioner–contractor and contractor–worker. Another scenario to be considered is that entrepreneurs only supplied the skilled labour, whereas the unskilled were employed and, more important, paid by the commissioner. However, even in this case we would probably have to assume the existence of mediators or brokers, which implies a hierarchical chain of patrons and clients.

If we tentatively hypothesise a relevant connection between building, contracting and clientage, we may construct a heuristic model aligning with the basic chronological development. In republican times the traditional Roman élite (*nobilitas*) would be highly motivated to exploit the political opportunities of architectural sponsorship, but at the same time reluctant to let fellow aristocrats, their competitors, take credit for public works. As a result, the construction of public edifices was reserved for elected magistrates, mainly the *censores* and *aediles*, and put under the fiscal control of the senate. Penelope Davies convincingly portrays these institutionalised constraints on public building as an intentional strategy to thwart monarchical aspirations, and as a major reason for the belated urban development of Republican Rome.<sup>21</sup> To some extent, these regulations could be circumvented, for example by the commissioning of ostentatious buildings of a private or semi-private character, such as monumental sepulchral complexes or family shrines.<sup>22</sup> With time it became increasingly popular among victorious generals (*triumphatores*) to spend their war booty (*manubiae*) on public building.<sup>23</sup> The disintegration of collective constraints was further accelerated by the introduction of a new building material, Roman ‘concrete’, which made construction more efficient but also enhanced the significance of unskilled labour.<sup>24</sup>

From the time of Augustus there was no longer any incentive for the *nobilitas* to gather votes and the emperor became nominally the sole patron of all citizens. In the city of Rome public building was largely monopolised by the emperor. Whereas commissioners of public buildings previously would have been interested in a high degree of personal involvement in the actual construction process, more responsibility would now be transferred to contractors and other professionals. The role of the emperor, on the other hand, gradually changed from that of a supervising magistrate, to that of a royal benefactor. Thus, although the emperor became increasingly reliant on

a sophisticated and highly organised building industry, he was still intrinsically connected to the projects that were initiated in his name. Let us study the implications of the model in more detail.

### *Privately commissioned building during the Republic*

Contracting of privately commissioned building during the Republic is very difficult to document, but the small legal interest in problems arising from private contracting before the first century AD provides an indication of the limited extent.<sup>25</sup> It could be that the precise stipulation of mutual responsibilities was preceded by a general reliance in the workings of patronage–clientage, i.e. there was no need to establish a legal contract between a patron and his client. It may also reflect a situation where many private commissioners of both public and private buildings also acted as the actual building entrepreneur. Conversely, wealthy entrepreneurs may have acted as public benefactors, but gave the contracts to themselves.

Concerning the constellation of the work force, one isolated but nonetheless interesting example is given by Plutarchos' biography of Marcus Licinius Crassus. Crassus is said to have made a fortune from real-estate development in Rome, buying a substantial number of trained slaves (over 500) to reconstruct or improve neglected tenement houses.<sup>26</sup> These slaves are described as skilled architects and builders and would have made any use of contractors superfluous. However, it is doubtful that this figure included the vast body of unskilled labour, which was certainly required. Could they have been recruited among Crassus' clientele?

### *Publicly commissioned building during the Republic*

According to the proposed model, magistrates responsible for public works strove to use their position to promote their own clientele, while political opponents tried to limit these possibilities. Public largess, even if it did not infringe on property rights of the élite, was often rejected by the senatorial class on the ground that it was more than the treasury could bear (the same treasury from which senators drew handsome allowances for themselves).<sup>27</sup> However, it would be a moot case to argue that the implementation of a *locatio–conductio* system in the handling of state expenses only had the purpose

of hindering magistrates from exploiting their offices for personal advantage, as it could just as well be a way of simplifying administration.

If only to offer an illustration to the described phenomenon, I will refer to an episode from the late second century BC. Caius Gracchus is reported to have secured the enactment of laws for constructing roads and granaries, under which he himself was charged with the administration. Apparently, he directed the work personally. According to Plutarchos he was surrounded by contractors and craftsmen, and Appianos says that he laid both groups under an obligation to him and made them ready to do whatever he wished.<sup>28</sup> The former writer also provides us with an example of how construction workers, engaged in building projects under his supervision, were used in the political street fighting.<sup>29</sup> This is the archetypal role of a client during the late Republic. Having large numbers of loyal supporters, working in the centre of the city, perhaps even in the immediate vicinity of the Forum, doubtlessly would have improved the political prospects of a patron. If nothing else, it would offer the possibility to secure a majority of voters in a *comitia* on short notice, in the situation of a near draw.<sup>30</sup>

### *Privately commissioned building during the Principate*

Whereas the corresponding evidence from previous periods is scanty, from the early Empire a well-defined set of problems in construction law emerges in the writings of the jurists.<sup>31</sup> This could reflect the increasing importance of entrepreneurs, as well as their independence in their dealings with the commissioner, the former no longer being in the position of a client. Conflicts concerning the fulfilment of building agreements were now brought to the courts on equal terms. The dissolution of politically induced patronage in Rome would suggest that there was less to gain by private largess, even if private individuals and magistrates continued to finance public buildings out of their own pocket in the provinces. Euergetism in terms of private funding of public amenities seems to have dwindled in imperial times, though.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, since private *euergetai* capitalised on their benefactions specifically through public commemoration in honorific inscriptions, there is a clear bias in the epigraphic evidence, making us underestimate civic and imperial funding of public works.<sup>33</sup>

Another possible consequence of the proposed development would be an



increased rate of diffusion of architectural innovations. Although technical inventions appear frequently during the entire Hellenistic period, diffusion was surprisingly slow. Many novelties within construction remained rare for centuries before they reached a general breakthrough. A major contributing factor, according to the present author, was the relative sparseness of networks that channelled information, in particular those networks that connected relevant decision makers with previous adopters (i.e. other decision makers, who already had experience of the innovation in question). The problem was enhanced by the fact that these decision makers often were laymen, who only engaged in the building trade intermittently.<sup>34</sup> As indicated by J.J. Coulton, the far-reaching involvement of commissioners and public committees in the building process was concomitant with a general conservatism, favouring traditional architectural solutions.<sup>35</sup> However, with the professionalisation of the building trade diffusion of new ideas speeded up. Trained experts and professional contractors had a better understanding of technical innovations and, as their role became more independent vis-à-vis the commissioner, they also gained the confidence and authority to try them out for themselves.<sup>36</sup>

### *Publicly commissioned building during the Principate*

If the emperors of the Principate are to be seen as 'universal patrons', the reasons for some of their building schemes could be found in the workings of traditional patronage. The interests and loyalty relationships of a single household (*familia*) and its dependants now became intrinsically linked with the state economy. Emperors who were great builders were often popular with the people, and this might explain why the death of Nero was regretted by the lower classes of Rome.<sup>37</sup> It should be noted, that Nero's single largest building project, the palatial Golden House, was not even meant for public use. Public building was a manifestation of patronage, not only through the buildings themselves, but also through the employment they offered and the positive side effects they had on the economy. Numerous town walls were raised without any real military threat, not to mention religious and commemorative monuments. These buildings did little to improve living conditions, but a large number of people, from all levels of society, benefited from the projects anyway. However, search for popularity cannot be the only explanation for the magnitude of imperial public building.

During the Republic the most valuable asset of a client was his vote. But the emperor was no longer in need of the citizens' votes, so why should he want to uphold the role of a patron anyway? A possible answer is provided by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill.<sup>38</sup> As he points out, the emperor had very few means of exercising political control, other than military force, due to the poorly developed administration and insufficient bureaucracy. In analogy with seventeenth century France, he therefore suggests that patronage was deliberately exploited as a method of extending the tentacles of imperial power. By creating a patron–client relationship with certain individuals, groups or communities all over the Empire, either directly or through 'brokers', the emperor established an effective network for governing. These relationships were formalised and manifested by an exchange of privileges and honours, but could be more effectively established and maintained through the sponsorship of and mutual engagement in building projects.

The century-long debate on the nature of Roman economy is now much less polarised than it once was. The coexistence of different aspects of subsistence economy, state controlled *dirigisme*, and market economy are generally accepted. To these ideal models can also be added the new concept of the 'bazaar economy', which highlights the importance of social networks, not least in terms of patronage–clientage.<sup>39</sup>

### Possible lines of investigations

Of course, commissioning and contracting of both private and public building were influenced by other factors than those mentioned here. Still, these considerations may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the Roman building industry. For instance, it might be possible to trace a development from leading families with a large number of architects, craftsmen, and builders among their slaves, freedmen and clients, to purely business-like construction companies. Here we should also consider the formation of a professional association, the *collegium fabrum tignariorum*, and its relation to the emperor.<sup>40</sup> Relationships within the building industry can be studied for example through grave inscriptions, in particular the epitaphs of freedmen. A thorough inventory of dedicatory/building inscriptions all over the empire would reveal much about the implementation of imperial building politics,<sup>41</sup> whereas S.D. Martin has already shown the importance of legal sources.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the buildings themselves represent a potentially rewarding source material, to be used in conjunction with other evidence. The study of ancient architecture does not merely involve the classification and appraisal of decorative elements and compositional patterns; nor is it limited to the archaeological documentation of construction techniques and building phases. Historical buildings and architectural remains constitute a valuable source of information on various aspects of past societies. By approaching these from different perspectives and applying different analytical methods, previous scholarship has extracted a wealth of knowledge on design and building processes; technology and innovation; logistics and organization; household patterns and living conditions; but also wider aspects, such as demography and economy; identity and ideology; social structure and political history. People of all periods interacted with their built environment in various ways, as commissioners, builders or users. The buildings may also help us reveal relationships between these groups, even between individuals, sometimes through formal analyses of aggregated data, sometimes by the use of contextual readings.

## Noter

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- 1 Lo Cascio 2007.
- 2 Casson 1978 (reprinted in Casson 1984, 117–129, with *addendum*).
- 3 Brunt 1966 (reprinted in Finley 1974, 84–102); Brunt 1980.
- 4 This view has been favoured for example by Skydsgaard (1983, 225), DeLaine (1997, 197), Anderson (1997, 124) and Bernard (2016).
- 5 Cf. Prachner 1980; Frontinus 2.116–118.
- 6 White 1970, 335, 367f.; Finley 1973, 73. However, Erdkamp (2016) recently argued for seasonal migration in the opposite direction.
- 7 Yavetz 1958.
- 8 Brunt 1980, 95; Garnsey 1998, 239.
- 9 DeLaine 1997, 222–224.
- 10 Crawford, 1970, 46.
- 11 Hopkins 1980, 112.
- 12 Hopkins 1980, 113.

- 13 Lo Cascio 2007, 630.
- 14 Frier 1977, 35.
- 15 The ‘multiplier effect’ of cash injections is discussed by DeLaine (1997, 224).
- 16 Bodei-Gigliani 1974.
- 17 Pleket 1988.
- 18 On the general ‘monetisation’ of social relationships in the late Republic, see Wallace-Hadrill 1989, 70f.
- 19 C. Holleran (2016) recently discussed the connection between clientage and employment, but expressed doubts regarding the significance of this factor for the distribution of menial tasks.
- 20 Plautus *Menaechmi* 571–579; Cicero *De officiis* 2.69–71. Both sources bear witness to the fact that clients with some money were preferred to honest ones.
- 21 Davies 2017.
- 22 For example the Tomb of the Scipios.
- 23 Favro 1996, 94.
- 24 Davies 2017.
- 25 Martin 1989, 20f.
- 26 Plutarchos *Crassus* 2.4.
- 27 Brunt 1966, 5.
- 28 Plutarchos *Caius Gracchus* 6.3–4; Appianos *Bella civilia* 1.23.
- 29 Plutarchos *Caius Gracchus* 12.4.
- 30 Cf. the situation in Periclean Athens (Lyttkens & Gerding 2018, 288).
- 31 Martin 1989, 21.
- 32 Duncan-Jones 1985.
- 33 Cf. Zuiderhoek 2005, 177.
- 34 Gerding forthcoming.
- 35 Coulton 1977, 16f.
- 36 Gerding & Östborn 2017.
- 37 Brunt 1980, 98; Tacitus *Historiae* 1.4, 1.78, 2.95; Suetonius *Otho* 7.
- 38 Wallace-Hadrill 1989, 81.
- 39 Bang 2006, 83.
- 40 See Pearse 1975; DeLaine 2003.
- 41 Cf. Hellström 2014.
- 42 Martin 1989.

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