Public building and clientage:
Social and political aspects of Roman building industry

HENRIK GERDING

Abstract

During the entire Roman era public expenses were relatively few. The army represented the single largest cost in the state finances. Besides that governmental expenses also included costs for the annona, the administration and, to a lesser degree, public games and festivals. But 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 potentially powerful instrument of governmental control over local politics and economy. Was this potential ever consciously exploited and, if so, in what ways? In this paper the author presents a heuristic model where Roman building is discussed within the framework of patronage–clientage. Finally, some possible future investigations are suggested where this model can be used as a starting point.

The significance of free labour – the basic proposition

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, 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 porterage of goods that arrived by sea, partly in the building trade. Personally, I find this proposition quite convincing.

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, 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), 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,

---

3 This view was also favoured by J.E. Skydsgaard, ‘Public building and society’, in Città e architettura nella Roma imperiale (= AnalRom Supplementum, 10), Odense 1983, 225; and J. DeLaine, The baths of Caracalla: a study in the design, construction, and economics of large-scale building projects in imperial Rome (= JRA Supplementary Series, 25), Portsmouth 1997, 197.
4 See for example G. Prachner, Die Sklaven und Freigelassenen im arretinischen Sigillatagewerbe, Wiesbaden 1980.
5 Frontinus 2.116–118.
skills they possessed, or were specially trained to perform qualified work. An employer would be reluctant to pay for this training if he 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 imagine the proletariat of the cities periodically migrating into the countryside to work with the harvest as day-labourers.\(^6\)

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.\(^7\) Furthermore, it has been shown that the urban free poor could not physically have survived on congiaria alone and must have found other sources of income – casual labour.\(^8\) 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.\(^9\) Almost 80% of the expenditure on the baths was spent on the work-force, and could very well have substituted other forms of imperial handouts.

**Public building as a governmental instrument – the question**

During the Principate one of the most important aims of the Roman civilian and military administration was to make sure that the economic system of the Empire worked smoothly and without mishap. This was a necessary prerequisite for collecting taxes, among other things, and was manifested in the concept of *pax romana*. At the same time, both administration and the public sector were kept to a minimum, mainly by the use of *locatio-conductio* whereby governmental affairs (including tax collecting) were let out to contractors.

The complexity of the Roman economy and the degree of monetisation have often been the subject of intense debate. According to some the minting of coins was only motivated by the desire to facilitate the payment of state expenditures and the collecting of taxes.\(^10\) Whether this be true or not, we still face the problem of how the government got 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.\(^11\) 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 legions. Hopkins’ own solution to the problem is that the flow of money taxes and of tax-stimulated trade redistributed state-issued silver coins.\(^12\) This is in all probability true, but it may be that the significance of state intervention has been underestimated. Major public building 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.\(^13\)

---


\(^7\) Z. Yavetz, ‘The living conditions of the urban plebs in Republican Rome’, *Latomus* 17, 1958, 500–517.

\(^8\) Brunt 1980 (supra n. 2), 95.

\(^9\) DeLaine 1997 (supra n. 3), 222–224.


\(^12\) Hopkins 1980 (supra n. 11), 114.

The raising of public buildings in Roman cities has often been discussed in terms of 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.\(^{14}\) 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.\(^{15}\) Studies on the prevailing ideological view towards work in antiquity have also led to the conclusion that unemployment ‘was not a public concern’.\(^{16}\) This may be true if looking at it as an issue 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 – the hypothesis

During the Roman Republic 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.\(^{17}\) 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. The difference is insignificant. 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.\(^{18}\) 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 were broken by the intermediary 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 workers. 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 directly by the commissioner.

---

14 The ‘multiplier effect’ of cash injections is also discussed by DeLaine1997 (supra n. 3), 224.
18 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.
If we tentatively hypothesise a relevant connection between building, contracting and clientage, we may construct a heuristic model describing the development. In republican times the *nobilitas* would be eager to exploit the political opportunities of privately sponsored building, but at the same time reluctant to let individual magistrates, their competitors, take credit for public works, paid for by the state treasury. Therefore, the level of privately commissioned building would be high and the forms for administrating public works strictly regulated. 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, if not in practice. Whereas private commissioners of public buildings previously would have been interested in a high degree of personal involvement, more responsibility would now be transferred to contractors. The role of the emperor, on the other hand, changed from that of a magistrate, the republican *censor*, to that of both initiator and *manceps*. The emperor thus took personal responsibility for carrying out the projects he proposed. 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 might provide an indication of the extent.\(^{19}\) It could be that the precise stipulation of mutual responsibilities was preceded by reliance in the workings of 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, thus giving the contracts to themselves.\(^{20}\)

Concerning the constellation of the work-force, one isolated but nonetheless interesting example is given by Plutarchos’ biography of 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 tenement houses.\(^{21}\) These slaves are described as skilled architects and builders and would have made any use of entrepreneurs 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’ proletarian 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 property rights of the elite, was often rejected by the senatorial class on the ground that it was more than the treasury could bear, the treasury from which senators drew handsome allowances for themselves.\(^{22}\) However, it would be a moot case to argue that the implementation of *locatio-conductio* in the handling of state expenses had the purpose of obstructing magistrates from getting personal advantages, 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. Obviously he directed the work personally. According to Plutarchos he was surrounded by contractors and

\(^{19}\) S.D. Martin, *The Roman jurists and the organization of private building in the Late Republic and early Empire* (= Collection Latomus, 204), Bruxelles 1989, 20f.

\(^{20}\) Cf. the corresponding practice in Hellenistic Greek world (Roland Oetjen forthcoming).

\(^{21}\) Plut. *Crassus* 2.4.

\(^{22}\) Brunt 1966 (supra n. 2), 5.
craftsmen, and Appianos says that he laid both groups under an obligation to him and made them ready to do whatever he wished.\footnote{Plut. Caius Gracchus 6.3–4; App. BC 1.23.} We are also given an example of how construction workers engaged in building projects under his supervision were used in the political street fighting.\footnote{Plut. Caius Gracchus 12.4.} This was maybe the most typical role of the client in the Late Republic.

**Privately commissioned building during the Principate:**  
Whereas the corresponding evidence from previous times is scanty, from the Early Empire a well-defined set of problems in construction law emerges in the writings of the jurists.\footnote{Martin 1989 (supra n. 19), 21.} 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 clientage meant that there was less to gain by private largess, but private individuals and magistrates still continued to finance public buildings. It can be argued that political motives were gradually replaced by a more general euergetism. At the same time, it has been pointed out that private spending of public building dwindled in imperial times.\footnote{R.P. Duncan-Jones, ‘Who paid for public buildings in Roman cities?’, in Roman urban topography in Britain and the western Empire (= CBA Research Report, 59), F. Grew & B. Hobley (eds), London 1985, 28–33.}

**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. What was once an isolated economy of a hignborn *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.\footnote{Brunt (supra n.2), 98; Tac. Hist. 1.4, 1.78, 2.95; Suet. Otho 7.} It should be noted, that Nero’s single largest building project, the 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 jobs they offered and the positive side-effects they had on the economy. Numerous town walls were raised without any real military need, 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 can not 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? The answer is provided by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill.\footnote{Wallace-Hadrill 1989 (supra n. 17), 81.} As he points out, the emperor had very few means of exercising political control, other than military, 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. One way of doing this would be through deliberately applying building politics.
Dedications, funeral inscriptions and legislation – possible lines of investigation

Of course, commissioning and contracting of public building were influenced by other factors than those mentioned here. Still, these considerations might contribute to future discussions and be used as a starting point for analyses of the Roman building industry. For instance, it might be possible to trace a development from republican families with a large number of architects, craftsmen, builders and construction workers among their amici, slaves, freedmen and clients, to purely businesslike construction companies in imperial times. Here we should also consider the formation of the collegium fabrum tignariorum and its relation to the emperor.\(^{29}\) The relations between the nobility and the building industry can be studied for example through grave inscriptions, in particular of the Statilii Tauri and the Haterii. Both families were deeply involved in this trade, directly or through their freedmen. A thorough inventory of dedicatory inscriptions all over the empire would reveal much on the use of imperial building politics, whereas S.D. Martin has already shown the importance of legal sources.\(^{30}\)

Another path to follow would be to discuss the implications of this model for our view on the Roman economy. Besides the general principles of household economy and market economy, both of which I believe were manifested in Roman times, we can here also see the outlines of a ‘network economy’. These principles do not necessary rule each other out but can very well coexist. A developed market economy need not be free from personal and social considerations, such as obligations towards a patron or a client.

\(^{29}\) See J.L.D. Pearse, *The organisation of Roman building during the Late Republic and early Empire* (PhD diss.), Cambridge 1975.

\(^{30}\) Martin 1989 (supra n. 19).