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3. Rome: Roman Citizenship

Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold A. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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3. Rome: Roman Citizenship

Abstract

The Roman concept of citizenship represents both a measure of their capacity to govern and one of their key contributions to Western culture. In the Greek city-state, citizenship was something which could not be separated from the intimate and varied life of the polis. It enabled a man to live the good life because it entitled him to participate in all the activities which the polis sponsored. Justice, Plato wrote, meant that every man in this society was doing that for which he was best suited and was receiving in return what was his due. It was the result of a harmony and a balance among the classes. There was little tendency here to picture the state as a legal creature called into existence in large part to protect individual rights. The Greek made no distinction between the state, which commands obedience, and society, which enlists cooperation. There was no hint that an Athenian citizen could retain his status as a citizen if he left Athens; if he left the city, he would become in this respect a fish out of water. Finally, there was no thought that citizenship could ever really become universal. Greek thinkers frankly believed that men were so unequal that only a few of them could ever hope to enjoy the good life and therefore only a few could be admitted into the ranks of citizen. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Rome, Greece, Golden Age, Tiber River, Roman Republic, citizenship

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | Cultural History | History

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold A. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

3. Roman Citizenship

Romans didn't have a police state. didn't depend on polis.

The Roman concept of citizenship represents both a measure of their capacity to govern and one of their key contributions to Western culture. In the Greek city-state, citizenship was something which could not be separated from the intimate and varied life of the polis. It enabled a man to live the good life because it entitled him to participate in all the activities which the polis sponsored. Justice, Plato wrote, meant that every man in this society was doing that for which he was best suited and was receiving in return what was his due. It was the result of a harmony and a balance among the classes. There was little tendency here to picture the state as a legal creature called into existence in large part to protect individual rights. The Greek made no distinction between the state, which commands obedience, and society, which enlists cooperation. There was no hint that an Athenian citizen could retain his status as a citizen if he left Athens; if he left the city, he would become in this respect a fish out of water. Finally, there was no thought that citizenship could ever really become universal. Greek thinkers frankly believed that men were so unequal that only a few of them could ever hope to enjoy the good life and therefore only a few could be admitted into the ranks of citizens.

From the early days of the republic, citizenship for the Roman had a meaning different from the one it had for the Greek. This is certainly a reflection of the basic distinction between the two people which helps to explain the diverse directions of their entire political development. To the Romans, citizenship was roughly something in the nature of a contract. It assumed that there was a separation between society and state, between the person with his interests on the one hand -- res privatae, or private affairs -- and the state with its interests on the other hand -- res publicae, or public affairs. Roman citizenship involved possession of certain clearly defined and desired rights. These included the right to own property, to engage in trade, to marry citizens, and to have recourse to the civil law. At certain periods in Roman history, they also included the right to vote, eligibility to hold public office, and -- in keeping with the Roman stress on duty -- eligibility for the army. Since citizenship was something vested firmly in a person, a Roman citizen was a Roman citizen whether he lived in Rome, Sicily, Egypt, or Judea.

Roman citizenship was something which other Italians desired as soon as they were brought under Roman tutelage. It was not to be granted, however, without opposition. Since it involved such privileges as the right to buy public lands *to trade* there were citizens who reasoned that to extend citizenship to many others would at the same time dilute its benefits for those who already enjoyed it. At first, by way of compromise, only some of the rights of Roman citizens were granted. It was only after a

war had been fought between the Romans and many other Italians (90-88 B. C.) that full Roman citizenship became general among persons living in Italy.

A more crucial test of Roman purpose and vision came when the issue arose of citizenship for the provincials. They were not distant kinsmen nor did they share the same peninsula. During the last two centuries of the republic, citizenship was granted to provincials on a very selective basis. Augustus made no basic change in this policy. He and his immediate successors believed that it should be given only in instances where it was especially deserved. For example, non-citizens in the army were made citizens upon the completion of their long term of service.

[Having gone this far in extending the concept, it represented only a broadening of existing policy to arrive at the decree of Emperor Caracalla in the year 212 granting citizenship to practically all freemen who did not yet have it. As we have seen, he did this in part because the empire was then in difficulty. However, a common imperial citizenship was the culmination of a process whose direction had been charted long before. It was quite in keeping with the spirit of a large and impersonal state which would not entirely swallow up the individual, but which would preserve for him a certain area, however small it might be, in which his dignity, integrity, and res privatae would be secure; in which, to use Stoic terms, his divine spark would not be extinguished]

It must be remembered that there was an aspect of citizenship as it is understood in the Western World today which received little attention from the Romans. As we have already seen, they were not greatly interested in voting, in holding public office, and generally in keeping a constant check on their rulers; nor were non-Roman citizens, who would have found it next to impossible to vote in Rome regularly if their residence happened to be Athens or Damascus. One of the prices that had to be paid for the Pax Romana was a moratorium on whatever interest remained in these tags of political liberty. The emperors assumed that when they received the imperium in the usual way, from the Senate, they had received their power through the consent of all the people and were entitled to rule with a free hand. As one of the great commentators on the Roman law put it: [What pleases the prince has the force of law, since the people assign to him and confer upon him all their sovereign authority and power." It was for other reasons than direct participation in government that men were proud to say: Civis Romanus sum (I am a Roman citizen). Witness the account of the affirmation of St. Paul:]

[But when they had tied him up with the thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen, and undemned?" When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For

Entertainment for the masses
Religious tolerance
as long as they worshipped the emperor
Resented the Jews, Christians, & Davids.

this man is a Roman citizen. So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him instantly; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.] *

immigration