

How Generous were the Romans in Granting Citizenship?¹

by Altay Coşkun

The Romans are famous for having fostered urban culture throughout the Mediterranean world. This was coupled with the spread of literacy and a marvellous production of Latin and Greek literature. Their empire not only covered the largest territory in antiquity, but its long duration has even remained unrivalled in world history. Since the 3rd century BC, it has been acknowledged that the preparedness to share some legal and material privileges, if not full citizenship, with immigrants, former slaves, and even defeated enemies contributed strongly to the growth and stability of the Roman state and empire. Ancient as well as modern authorities have thus been appraising the inclusive and generous nature of Roman citizenship policy.

As one out of many examples, I quote a passage from the *Roman Antiquities* (1.9.4=1.26f.), written by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in 8/7 BC: *And when Romulus established the city named for him ... they adopted the name which they have now. And over time they managed to become the greatest nation from the smallest one, and the most famous from the most obscure, both by humanely welcoming those seeking a home among them, and by sharing citizens' rights with those who had been conquered in a nobly fought war, and allowing the slaves who were manumitted among them to become citizens, and by scorning no condition of men from whom the commonwealth might gain an advantage.*

Before we embrace the Romans' attitude as a model for integrating migrants today, it is worthwhile having a closer look at the conditions under which the Romans accepted new citizens into their state. Apparently, Dionysius is no longer concerned with the citizenship of a city state, but rather with the privileged status of the elite within an empire. He does not fail to mention the preceding wars of conquest, and with "advantage" he clearly refers to the Romans'

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need for a steady influx of soldiers fighting their wars. He further accepts slavery, that is mainly the enslavement of captives of war, as a justified practice, even though he acknowledges the benefit of enfranchising freedmen. It emerges that a deeper understanding of Roman citizenship policy requires a closer look at Roman imperialism.

*Bronze sculpture of she-wolf suckling
Romulus and Remus*

*13th century AD statue with figures of twins
added in the 15th century*

*Picture from Wikipedia, Art. Romulus and
Remus*



We see before us probably the most renowned representation of Romulus and Remus, the founders of the city of Rome. The she-wolf is, of course, not the mother of the twins, but only sort of their wet-nurse. At any rate, she not only instilled milk into the boys but also the courage of a predator. The 'natural' parents of Romulus and Remus were Mars and Rhea Silvia. The former was an Italian warrior god identified with the Greek Ares. The latter was the offspring of a variety of local deities, but most prominently, she was a descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas, the pious accomplisher of the divine plan, who settled the remnants of the fallen city in Latium. His father was the prophet Anchises, his mother was Venus, the goddess of love, fertility, but also of war and good luck. In a nutshell, these myths vividly express the qualities with which the Romans prided themselves.

As compared to such a noble past, the historical beginnings of the Romans were quite modest. During most of the 5th and even 4th centuries, they tried to gain, maintain, or re-gain control over Latium, the landscape that extended around 100 km to the south of Rome. At that time, they were under nearly constant pressure from their aggressive neighbours: the Etruscans to the north, the Aequi to the east, and the Volsci to the south (see map). The take-off on the

Romans' way towards a world empire started with their victory in the so-called Latin War in 338 BC. It was then that they established a firm grip of Latium. By this time, the Romans had been developing manifold modes of not only controlling their defeated enemies, but rather of making productive use of the latter's manpower reserves. While our knowledge of individual arrangements with defeated cities or tribes is limited, six major patterns emerge.

They sometimes added the territory of their former enemies to their own state. In the case of Etruscan Veii or Latin Tusculum, they granted the inhabitants the full franchise. But in other cases, such as Campanian Capua or Greek Cumae, they prohibited their inhabitants from having a vote in Roman elections. The degree of their local autonomy was dependant on the goodwill of the Romans. Most of the defeated Italian enemies, also the aforementioned, had to cede farm land to the Romans, who normally sent out settlers from among their own or from their allies. The majority of such foundations were called 'Latin colonies', while a few were established as 'colonies of Roman citizens'. At least originally, the difference was that the former were much larger and could thus be independent city states, whereas the latter were smaller and remained an integral part of the Roman state. Other subjugated opponents formally maintained their autonomy, but they were bound to Rome by a treaty of alliance, such as Latin Tibur or Greek Naples. Some of the treaties were called "equal", whereas others explicitly stated that "the majesty of the Roman people be observed". Over time, however, all allies, including the Latins, had to obey Rome's orders, that is mainly to send soldiers on an annual basis.

With their recruiting ground thus enhanced after the Latin War, the Romans gradually established supremacy over Samnium, Umbria, and Etruria until the 290s BC. The victory over the Greek cities on the southern coast followed by 270 BC. The Po Valley in Northern Italy had to be conquered repeatedly due to invasion of further opponents from north of the Alps. In 177 BC the subjugation was complete. Thereafter, colonization within Italy ceased for nearly two generations. But the Romans continued their policy of variegated control until the outbreak of the Social War (91-87 BC). The latter broke out, when the Romans refused to grant the same rights to all free inhabitants of Italy. Only then they were prepared to grant citizenship, starting with the still loyal allies (mainly the Latins). But soon thereafter they made offers also to the rest of the Italians, though under less favourable conditions. The Roman aristocracy made sure that the new citizens' political weight was heavily limited for up to two generations.



However, still in the mid-3rd century BC, the Romans had begun to seize extra-Italian territories as well. In the Punic Wars, they first wrested Sicily from the maritime empire of Carthage (241 BC). No later than 188 BC, hegemony over the whole of the Mediterranean was complete. From then on, all kings and dynasts were eager to be awarded the title 'Friend of the Roman people'. The empire reached its pinnacle under the Emperor Trajan (AD 98-117): his rule extended from the British Island in the west to Mesopotamia (today's Iraq) in the east.

Beginning in 89 BC, the Romans gradually offered their citizenship even to loyal allies who lived outside of Italy. They sometimes enfranchised individuals who had fought bravely for Rome. But they also conveyed the 'Latin status' to whole cities which they considered loyal and meritorious; this means that the highest officials of each year were encouraged to apply for Roman citizenship. Since the 1st century AD, the most frequent way of becoming a Roman citizen was to serve in the army for 25 years. The process of the legal and political inclusion of the provinces culminated in AD 212, when the Emperor Caracalla offered Roman citizenship to all of his free subjects. However, its 'value' had diminished by then: free votes had become history, once Julius Caesar had started the Civil War in 49 BC; tax privileges had eroded over time before they vanished completely at the end of the 3rd century AD; citizens were no longer exempt from torture either; and the proliferation of citizenship decreased its importance as a social status marker.

Notwithstanding such delays in granting citizenship, for a balanced assessment, one has to acknowledge that the Romans provided at least some legal protection to foreigners as early as the 5th century BC. A different matter, though, was the subjects' access to appeal against decisions of state authorities. In this regard, the situation was at least seriously improved by Augustus, the first Roman emperor (44/27 BC-AD 14). The same ruler also limited to a reasonable extent the taxation of the provincials. Thus he laid the groundwork for two centuries of prosperity throughout the Mediterranean, to a degree experienced neither earlier nor matched again before the modern age.

Reconsidering the paths of Roman History from the 5th century BC to the 3rd century AD, it appears difficult to define a consistent citizenship policy, at least at a first glance. For the Romans reacted flexibly

to their own needs, while they were growing first to regional leadership and then building a world empire. Given this imperialistic context, they were repeatedly – though not persistently – prepared to include foreigners into their society. They were always concerned about maintaining or even enhancing control within and beyond the boundaries of their own territory. A particular target therefore was to exploit ever new manpower resources to keep the war machine going.

However, conveying citizenship was only the tip of the iceberg. The Romans often refused the franchise, but shared more specific rights: for example, they allowed most foreigners a high degree of mobility, and granted them at least a limited access to their courts. While discussing whether to share citizenship or related rights with others, the Romans acknowledged past merits of the latter, but at times a loyal attitude was enough to warrant future merits. In case larger groups of new citizens were admitted, a major concern was to check their potential political influence. Therefore, the right to vote or to stand for office could be withheld for decades or even centuries after the franchise. But, sooner or later, the status of (no longer) new citizens, whose loyalty had been proven, would be normalized.

Is 'generosity' an appropriate qualification for such a citizenship policy? From a strictly modern perspective, certainly not. As to the ancients' points of view, we have to acknowledge several appraisals of the Roman practice as enthusiastic as Dionysius', but, at the same, time should not fail to perceive the ideological character of such utterances. The perceptions of cities which had to cede territory to colonists, or were even forced into the Roman citizen body, are rarely available to us. It is further hard to overlook the grievance caused to allied (especially Latin) cities of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC, whose elite was drained through the selective enfranchisements by the superpower.

However, as to the franchise of slaves, the notion of generosity is not out of place, for most other slave holding societies were more reluctant firstly to release slaves after some years of satisfactory service, and secondly even to offer these freedmen citizenship. This notwithstanding, one should not ignore the social, legal, and political discrimination that most freedmen had to face for the rest of their lives. And, ultimately, Roman inclusiveness was strictly guided by the political and economic advantages of the pre-existing citizen body, which was stabilized not only by the partial inclusion of the many freedmen, but also by the perspective of slaves to be able to raise a family. They would be less inclined to run away, rebel, or refuse to work hard.

As a conclusion, it would seem that no one can reasonably embrace Roman citizenship policy as a model for a modern nation state any longer. But despite its imperialistic connotations, I am still convinced that some lessons may be learnt from the Romans today. Most prominently, I suggest that we treat citizenship as a political matter of the highest importance. It is not only legitimate but highly useful to discuss openly the need for either allowing more immigration or curbing it, and to have debates about defining the entry conditions for those requesting access to the country or citizen body. There should of course be a fair balance between respecting the dignity of the people who knock at the door on the one hand and taking seriously the concerns of the ones who hold the key on the other.