John Nicols

The Emperor and the Selection of the patronus civitatis. Two Examples

aus / from

Chiron

Ausgabe / Issue **8 • 1978**
Seite / Page **429–432**
https://publications.dainst.org/journals/chiron/1409/5758 • urn:nbn:de:0048-chiron-1978-8-p429-432-v5758.8

Verantwortliche Redaktion / Publishing editor
Redaktion Chiron | Kommission für Alte Geschichte und Epigraphik des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Amalienstr. 73 b, 80799 München
Weitere Informationen unter / For further information see **https://publications.dainst.org/journals/chiron**
ISSN der Online-Ausgabe / ISSN of the online edition **2510-5396**
Verlag / Publisher **Verlag C. H. Beck, München**

JOHN NICOLS

The Emperor and the Selection of the *patronus civitatis*. Two Examples

The patronage of communities is one of the most commonly mentioned of public honors appearing on inscriptions.[1] It is reasonable to assume that the idea underlying this dignity is that the patron has performed, or is expected to perform, some kind of benefaction for the community. What the benefaction is, is rarely specified; rather, one finds such expressions indicating that the title was bestowed by the community *ob merita eius* or *ob beneficia eius* or, in a more elaborate but equally vague formulation *ob insignem fidem industriam erga se in civilibus officiis*.[2] There is then a recognition that the honor and the services are in direct relation to one another.

Theoretically and in practice, the evidence indicates that the understanding between patron and client-community was reached voluntarily and then formalized by a public and official «cooptation» in the form of a *decretum decurionum*.[3] The role of an intermediary in this process is sometimes mentioned, but never dominates the decision.[4] This is because the two contracting parties must fulfil the obligations owed to one another directly; the existence of a middle man could only serve to break down the sense of mutual obligation.

Considering the importance of this institution in the struggles of the late republic and the civil wars,[5] it would not be surprising to find the emperor involved as a middleman in the selection process, both nominating the loyal and discouraging those of questionable allegiance. Epigraphically speaking, however, there is little evidence to support this hypothesis. After Augustus, who during the early years of his reign regularly became the patron of a community, the empe-

---

[1] There are over one thousand known patrons, see L. HARMAND, Le patronat sur les collectivités publiques, Paris 1957.

[2] CIL III 296; X 5653; and IX 2565, respectively. For a discussion of the formulae, see HARMAND 357–8.

[3] This is specified by the *lex Malacitana*, ILS 6089, c. 61, and regularly appears in inscriptions, e. g., ILS 6106.

[4] Cf. Fronto, ad am. 2, 11, and perhaps also Plinius, ep. 6, 18.

[5] Cf. M. GELZER, Die Nobilität der römischen Republik, Kleine Schriften, Wiesbaden 1962, I 89 ff.

rors and the other members of the imperial house no longer accepted the honors, nor is there any complaint to be found in the sources that they coerced the communities to honor their favorites. Rather, it is the other way around; communities appear to have naturally sought out the protection of those men known to have influence with the emperor.[6] There was then no reason for the emperor to intervene directly in the selection process.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what I believe are the only known cases in which the emperor, contrary to his usual practice, was more active in determining who should be patron.

The first of the two relevant inscriptions concerns the career of the distinguished equestrian, Q. Decius Saturninus (PIR² D 27). The inscription reads (ILS 6286):

Q. Decio Q. f. M. n. / Saturnino / pontif. minori Romae tubicini / sacror. publ. p. R. Quirit. praef. fabr. cos. /5 ter. curatori viarum Labic. / et Latinae / trib. mil. praef. fabr. i. d. et sortiend. / iudicibus in Asia / IIIIvir. i. d. Veronae /10 q. bis IIvir. i. d. IIvir. iter. quinq. praef. / quinq. Ti. Caesaris Augusti iter. / Drusi Caesaris Ti. f. tertio Neronis / Caesaris Germanici f. pontif. flamini / Romae et divi August. perpetuo ex auctor. /15 Ti. Caesaris Augusti et permissu [*e*]*ius / cooptato coloniae patrono / publice d. d.*

The inscription, a dedicatory decree dating to the first half of the principate of Tiberius (line 11) lists a variety of offices, dignities and honors enjoyed by Saturninus. In the imperial service, he was several times *praefectus fabrum* (4–7), at this time still an important position on the staff of a governor.[7] On the municipal level, he held all the usual magistracies in his home town of Aquinum and was *praefectus quinquennalis* in the place of Tiberius.[8] After listing all these honors, the decree concludes with the statement (15–17): *ex auctoritate Ti. Caesaris Augusti et permissu eius cooptato coloniae patrono publice d. d.*

Leaving aside the role of the emperor at this juncture, it is clear that the *decuriones* did, in fact, coopt Saturninus among the patrons of the town. That is, he was not formally appointed to the position by the emperor, but received the honor in the normal manner from the *decuriones*. Indeed, the use of the *(ex) permissu eius* suggests that they may have initiated the affair by applying to Tiberius to approve their choice of patron. Why they should ask his permission is not at all clear from the available evidence. It may be that, at the time the honor was being discussed, Saturninus was on active duty in the imperial service and they thought it appropriate to secure the emperor's formal approval in advance. Nevertheless, too little is known of the circumstances surrounding this action to venture more definite conclusions.

If it is accepted that the *decuriones* took the initiative, then the meaning of

---

[6] E. g., ILS 6106.

[7] E. Birley, Roman Britain and the Roman Army, Kendal 1961, 139–40 (= The Equestrian Officers of the Roman Army, Durham University Journal 1949, 11–12).

[8] On this office, see the *lex Salpensa*, ILS 6088, cc. 24–5.

ex auctoritate should be understood not as a direct order of the emperor, nor simply «with his permission» (which would be redundant with *permissu eius*). Rather, the expression should be translated as «on the advice of Tiberius». This interpretation does not, however, require that the emperor be the instigator of the action.

The second inscription in which the emperor figures prominently in the naming of a patron reads (CIL X 416 = Inscr. It. III 1,22):

*P. Otacilio. L. f. Pal. Rufo Pat. / IIIIvir. i. d. II. qq. flam. perpetuo / divi Hadriani ab eodem equo publ. / honorato curatori kalendari r. p. /*5 *Aeclanensium, electo a divo Pio / patrono municipi / ob eximiam munificentiam eius ordo. dec.! pecunia publica ponendum cens. cuius / dedicatione dec. (denarios) III Aug. (denarios) II pop. (denarium) I dedit.*

This too is a dedication to a prominent equestrian, P. Otacilius Rufus from the municipality of Volcei, whose career spans the principates of Hadrian through Marcus Aurelius. The former honored him with an *equus publicus*, but he did not assume any offices in the imperial service, preferring (?) to remain in his home town where he was twice *IIIIvir* and once *quinquennalis*. After listing these and other honors, the first part of the inscription concludes (5–6): *electo a Divo Pio patrono municipi*.[9] Once again, nothing is known about the circumstances surrounding this action, but the use of *eligere* suggests that the *decuriones*, for reasons which are unclear, may have been unable to decide who should be the patron and submitted a list of several candidates to the emperor, Antoninus Pius, and he selected Rufus.

Such an action would not be unprecedented, for there was nothing unusual about petitioning the emperor.[10] That he was petitioned on such questions of patronage is not otherwise directly attested, but there is good evidence that prominent and influential men like Fronto were consulted on such matters. Indeed, one of his letters to his home town concerns itself with this very problem (ad am. 2, 11). Hence, it is likely that, if there is little evidence that matters of patronage were submitted to the emperor for approval, it is not because there was a lack of interest in obtaining imperial confirmation, but because he generally refused to confirm the petition and the communities did not record the refusal.[11]

---

[9] OEHLER ascribes *electo* to *curatori*, RE 10 (1919) 1565; Inscr. It. however, understands *electo* to refer to *patrono* and this seems to me to be the correct interpretation for several reasons. First, the expression *curator kalendari r.p.* usually stands alone in these inscriptions. Second, the importance of *electo a divo Pio* is weakened in the end position (with *curatori*), but strong at the beginning. And, third, the whole expression is closely parallel to the one discussed above where *cooptato* also precedes *patrono*. The general conclusion of this paper is not affected by either interpretation.

[10] F. MILLAR, The Emperor at Work, London 1977, 420 ff., and J. DEININGER, Die Provinziallandtage der römischen Kaiserzeit (Vestigia 6), München–Berlin 1965, 164.

[11] MILLAR 435-6.

A parallel to these two cases may be found in the honorary decrees for Opramoas from Rhodiapolis in Lycia. Recorded on his tomb is a series of honors voted by the provincial assembly.[12] Some of these decrees had been sent to Rome and had been confirmed by the reigning emperor, Antoninus Pius.[13] As the reason for one rescript, Antoninus notes that he is responding to the letters sent to him about the unusual generosity of Opramoas following a natural disaster. It may be that Antoninus here, too, wished to recognize the generosity of Rufus to his fellow-citizens (cf. ll. 7–9) and did so by confirming his *patrocinium*. If so, perhaps some similar act of generosity might also be assumed for Saturninus.

In summary, the communities, who were accustomed to petition the emperor on a variety of matters, were the instigators in this question. Judging by the fact that there are only two known cases when patrons received this kind of imperial approval and that the honor would surely be recorded if it had been granted, it would seem likely that the emperors generally avoided making such recommendations. Whether this restraint is to be attributed to the wish to maintain the volume of petitions at a reasonable level or to an official perception of the ‹independence› and voluntary nature of the dignity is unclear. Equally uncertain is also the question of why the emperor gave his approval in the cases of Saturninus and Rufus, and whether their equestrian status or unusual generosity may have been factors in the decision. What can be concluded here is that the emperors made little use of whatever ‹rights› they might have had to appoint patrons directly, or to approve the choices made. Nevertheless, it should not be doubted that their tacit approval was important, even critical, to the decision of the community.

---

[12] TAM II, 3, 905.

[13] TAM II, 3, 905, cc. 42, 44, 46-51.