

Literature Year 2

Lesson 6



Patrons and Clients

The relationship between clients and patrons was one that permeated the Roman world. There is a short lecture here: https://youtu.be/Cp5_rjo55JI¹ which has a very good diagram of the pyramid structure and percentages of the various social classes in the Roman society of Paul's day. Watch the little lecture (you do not need to do the discussion on 2 Peter 1:3-11) and copy the pyramid diagram here noting down the various percentages of the different classes:

Patrons were wealthy individuals from a high social class. They saw the benefit of providing money to a client in exchange for their political support and to get people to spread their name. As the patron-client system was so ingrained in Roman society some patrons were from lower social classes. All you needed to be a patron was to be wealthier, better-connected and have a higher status than your clients. In this way, many patrons could have a patron of their own.

¹ Note: I do not necessarily endorse the teaching of Dr Bart Bruehler or Indiana Wesleyan University.

Benefits For Patrons. A patron would gain status/seem powerful from having a lot of clients. The most successful politician was often the most frequently seen and heard. Patrons would, therefore, wait for crowds of clients to meet them at the *salutatio* (morning meetings at the patron's home). The clients would escort their patron on the *deductio* (walk to the Forum). This is where political decisions were made so the more clients a patron had the stronger they would appear, politically. Clients applauded patrons' speeches and provided political support when decisions were being made and try to win their patron votes in the Forum. When there was no voting, clients spread the good name of their patrons. Patrons could also benefit from having his clients do jobs for him and could expect to share in the profits of his client's businesses. If a patron ended up in court he could count on the support of his clients. Clients could also be invited to dinner where they would pay no end of compliments to their patrons, thus massaging their egos. This system has lasted into modern Italy, where a *padrone*/'Godfather' supports/protects poorer 'clientele' who, in return, owes favours and political support.

Drawbacks For Patrons In return for the political and social support clients provided, patrons were expected to provide a *sportula* for their clients which was a handout of either food or money. A larger amount would be given out on holidays and on New Year. So if a patron had a large number of clients, this would become expensive. However, if the amount you gave didn't satisfy the clients, they could leave and find another patron. Patrons needed as much support as possible so they needed to ensure the loyalty of their clients.

Clients A variety of people could serve as clients. In Rome, everyone except the emperor was someone's client. Newcomers to Rome/merchants/craftsmen/freedmen/people who had broken away from their families, might attach themselves to another family. Someone could be a patron and a client at the same time. e.g. a wealthy freedman had many poor clients but would also be a client to another patron.

Benefits For Clients It was a legal requirement that a patron would provide the same protection which a *paterfamilias* was required to give to any member of his family. Masters would also provide: loans of money, influence over business deals or marriages, support for a client's candidacy for political office or priesthood. However, most clients' ambitions were less exalted than this as being a client was about survival. Many who were unemployed couldn't buy basic food requirements. Patrons would give a regular *sportula* of food or money, or an invitation to dinner for poorer clients. Patrons would sometimes provide clients with new clothes.

Drawbacks For Clients The writer Juvenal explains a typical day for a client, starting at the *salutatio* (the meeting of a client and patron at the clients home): "Roman citizens in togas wait in crowds and scramble on their patrons doorway for their tiny allowances. The great man stares closely at each face, making sure no cheats turn up... you only get your rations when you've passed this scrutiny. So the day wears on with its set routines, that round of duties - 'so fascinating'. After pocketing this dole, he has to attend 'my lord'; to the forum and stare at the statues bored stiff... then follow the patron home, hoping desperately for a dinner invitation that never comes."

A client may have more than one patron, whose interests could come into conflict. So, if your patrons had a disagreement you would need to reach a decision about who to support and lose some of your *sportula*. Even though many clients were very poor, they were expected to attend the *salutatio* in a toga, to prove their citizenship. These togas were very expensive but arriving at a patron's house with a damaged/messy toga might result in them not paying a *sportula* for the day. Failing to address your patron as 'my lord' could result in losing the *sportula*. If patrons weren't very generous, a client couldn't do anything except find another patron.²

2 Information edited from <https://getrevising.co.uk/revision-cards/patrons-and-clients>