“BECOMING ROMAN, BECOMING BARBARIAN”:
ROMAN CITIZENSHIP AND THE ASSIMILATION OF BARBARIANS
INTO THE LATE ROMAN WORLD¹

Ralph W. Mathisen

One of the great questions that has confronted historians for the past 1500 years is the nature of and reasons for the decline and fall of the western Roman Empire in the 5th century CE. All too often, this question has been posed in the context of opposition between the Romans and the barbarians who eventually established their own kingdoms in the Western Empire. When looked at from the perspectives of citizenship and identity, however, a rather different picture emerges. Rather than being invariably viewed as ‘outsiders’, barbarians had a long history of immigrating into the Roman Empire and then becoming integrated under the social and legal umbrella of Rome. In the 3rd century CE, Rome’s inclusive citizenship policy became extended to include new barbarian settlers. By the time of the barbarian invasions of the 5th century, Romans and barbarians had more similarities than differences, a consideration that helps to explain the largely non-violent nature of the barbarian occupation of the western Roman Empire.

At the beginning of the Roman Empire, Roman citizenship was an elite legal status to which certain rights, privileges, and obligations accrued under civil and criminal law.² For example, in private life, citizens (or cives Romani) could marry, make wills and carry out business under the protection of Roman law. Under the criminal code, citizens could not be questioned under torture, had the right of appeal, and if sentenced to death, were given a simple execution rather than crucifixion or death in the arena. But not everyone living in the Roman Empire at this time was a citizen. Far from it. The majority of the free population in the empire lived

¹ Sections of this study draw upon Mathisen 2006, © 2006 by the American Historical Association.
in the provinces and did not hold citizenship. These people were known as *provinciales* (provincials) or *peregrini* (foreigners) and they remained subject to whatever legal system was in force in their communities at the time of their annexation by Rome.

One of the great successes of the Roman Empire was that Roman citizenship became available to everyone living in the empire. The usual ways for *provinciales* to become citizens was by becoming members of city councils or by serving in the *auxilia*, the provincial branch of the Roman army (Figures 1–2), the rationale for this being that citizenship should be a reward either for services expected or services already rendered.

Even slaves (*servi*) had the opportunity to become citizens. Slaves were frequently manumitted and thus became free. A freed slave of a provincial gained the legal status of a provincial, and accordingly had the citizenship opportunities that were available to provincials, whereas a freed slave of a Roman was given the legal status of *libertus*, with partial citizenship rights. The children of a *libertus* gained full citizenship rights. Thus, there was a regular filtering upwards of individuals from lesser to higher legal status, and accordingly, a constant increase in the number of full Roman citizens.

*The Antonine Constitution*

As the centuries wore on, the citizen body increased due to grants of citizenship to provincial army veterans and local elites, and the passing on of citizenship rights by inheritance. Thus, citizenship and access to Roman civil law (*ius civile*) became less and less a special status and more a lowest common denominator. This process culminated with the issuing in 212 CE of the Antonine Constitution, through which the emperor Caracalla (211 to 217) granted citizenship to nearly all of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire who did not already possess it. The descendants of previous barbarian settlers would have become citizens along with everyone else. The only surviving copy of Caracalla’s law, a papyrus Greek translation of the Latin original, is unfortunately very fragmentary, but the crucial words translate as, “I grant to all those in the Roman world the citizenship of the Romans”. Many additions have been proposed for the

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4 For the text, see Riccobono 1968: no. 88, 445–9; Heichelheim 1940.