

# From *splendidissimae urbes* to *infirmas ciuitates*. On the Crisis of the Latin Municipal System and Its Ideological and Institutional Causes

David Espinosa-Espinosa<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper provides a preliminary approach to the possible causes for an ideological shift among the members of the Latin municipal elites between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AD. Such change would have been a part of the internal factors, which contributed to the decline of the Latin municipal system in the western provinces. This would have translated into the material and institutional crisis of this specific kind of privileged community. To this end, written, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence from Roman towns are analysed in order to infer some signs of the ideological shift. Then, a workable model for a historical explanation is offered, focusing on the lack of institutional sustainability of the Latin municipal system.

## Introduction

There is strong written, archaeological and epigraphic evidence to support the idea that between the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD the Latin municipal system (at least in *Hispania*) started to face serious difficulties that compromised its continuity, leading to its transformation and final decline.<sup>2</sup> Early signs of such process can be noticed in the *epistula Vespasiani ad Saborenses* (77 AD), *epistula Titi ad Muniguenses* (79 AD) and *epistula Domitiani* at the end of the *lex Irnitana* (91 AD).<sup>3</sup> With a deep historical dimension and spatial and chronological differences,<sup>4</sup> this crisis reveals an undeniable material nature, which, according to the archaeological data,<sup>5</sup> allows us to explain it through a feasible model of signs and causes.

In this respect, the decay of the urban infrastructure and architecture since the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD in many Roman towns in *Hispania* is correlated in a number of news present in the written and epigraphic evidence, which report (this time for the Roman Empire as a whole) on the financial and administrative problems that affected certain regions.<sup>6</sup> Such problems have been attributed to the lack of economic and institutional sustainability of the municipal system, especially concerning the Latin municipal status.<sup>7</sup> The result would have been a material and institutional crisis in a large number of *municipia* (but also *coloniae*) since the end of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, arising in some cases *infirmas ciuitates* and *oppida labentia*, which could have well deserved the consideration of *ciuitates intermortuae*.<sup>8</sup>

### Focusing on the Internal Factors: the Ideological Shift

The origin of the material and institutional crisis of the Latin municipal system can be traced through a number of factors that led to a weakening of the social, political, and economic fabric of the Roman towns. Depending on their type, such factors can be classified as external and internal. While the former have been identified and analysed in depth by historians on ancient Rome,<sup>9</sup> the latter represent a complicated challenge to researchers due to problems in their identification, as they are less obvious but equally or even more decisive than the previous ones. This difficulty is worsened if we consider that their roots were related to an ideological shift, a change of values and a variation in the interests and priorities of the municipal elites, resulting in a transformation of their civic behaviour.<sup>10</sup>

### Signs of Ideological Shift

The starting point for establishing the possible causes of this ideological shift is to consider the signs and effects that were brought about by this change. Unlike their causes, we have information about such signs from the written and epigraphic evidence. In general, they are a series of trends, behaviours and historical phenomena, which allow us to perceive certain aspects of the ideological shift. In particular, we are referring to six key-aspects: 1) the depreciation of munificent activity and the self-representing behaviour of the traditional municipal elites, 2) the passiveness of part of these elites with regard to civic responsibilities of an administrative and religious nature, 3) the political intervention by the Imperial authorities in financial issues through *curatores rei publicae* and provincial governors, 4) the economic intervention by the Imperial authorities through financially rescuing the *pecunia communis*, 5) the recruitment of decurions and the holding of civic magistratures by *alieni, municipes* who did not have the necessary legal age, and from a low socio-economic background, 6) the prevalence of the hereditary criterion to access to the decurionate, as well as the nomination in the appointment of magistrates.<sup>11</sup>

These six phenomena seem to constitute obvious symptoms of a lack of interest on part of the traditional municipal elites in the public spheres and the social projection of their *merita*.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, such as the political and economic intervention by the Imperial authorities, they are probably indicative of negligent practices in the management of the *res publicae* by magistrates and decurions, as is well known in the eastern Roman towns.<sup>13</sup> In addition, following the reign of the emperor Trajan, the ruling families in *Hispania*, would have been increasingly less willing to make their social prestige visible through official sculptural programmes, or paying for public spectacles or monumental works. This seems to have been a case of neutral attitude towards municipal affairs by local elites, in the grip of an unfavourable economic situation, especially if we consider that the reason for their excessive spending (access to positions of municipal responsibility) ceased to be a priority in the mind of them in a great many cases.<sup>14</sup>

Both of these situations can be found in two epigraphic testimonies. The first one is the *Oratio de pretiis gladiatorum minuendis* (177/178 AD), which refers to the satisfaction felt by the priests of the imperial cult due to the measures implemented by the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Commodus. These reduced the price of the *munera gladiatoria* that they had to cover at the cost of their own personal wealth,<sup>15</sup> wealth, which, based on the measures adopted by Marcus Aurelius to help the situation of the *Hispani exhausti*, was not precisely in its best shape.<sup>16</sup> The second is an inscription from *Barcino* dated from between 161–169 AD, which contains the legacy of *L. Caecilius Optatus* to the town.<sup>17</sup> One of his last wishes was to pay for an annual wrestling match and oil in the public baths, while his freedmen were excused from the charges of the *seviratus*. As stipulated in the *cautio legatorum*, if any of them were required to comply with the *munera* of such *collegium*, the legacy would be passed to *Tarraco*.

### Causes of Ideological Shift

It is more complicated to identify the reasons that led to this change in mentality amongst the Latin municipal elites, as there are no sources that provide us with any explicit information about them. In order to define them, we have to use the aforementioned signs of ideological shift and carry out a process of historical reflection within the framework of the existing conditions at social, legal and economic level in the Roman towns. The result is a plausible new proposal that considers the following four key aspects: 1) the acquisition of Roman citizenship *per honorem* by the local elites through the *Latium*, 2) the new forms of social and economic promotion of the romanised municipal oligarchies, 3) the disappearance of the spirit of munificent civic group amongst the Latin municipal elites, 4) the growing fear in the city due to the degradation of urban living conditions.

With regard to the first one, the quick legal romanisation of the Latin ruling families could well have encouraged, after obtaining the status *optimo iure*, a lack of interest in public duty and munificence amongst certain local elites. As demonstrated by the epigraphic evidence from the *municipia Flauia* such as *Igabrum* and *Cisimbrium*,<sup>18</sup> the *ius Latii* granted by Vespasian to Hispania included enjoyment of the *ius adipiscendae ciuitatis Romanae per magistratum*, a privilege that was enjoyed by the parents, wife, children and grandchildren of the former Latin magistrate, establishing in six families (one for each ordinary magistrate) the maximum number of beneficiaries per year.<sup>19</sup> However, we do have to accept the possibility that after this prerogative had been in effect for a couple of years, this number was reduced to four, two, and then none, due to the post of magistrate being held by citizens who had already been romanised.<sup>20</sup>

The effects of this *beneficium*, known as *Latium minus*, were completed and extended as a result of the final reform made to the legal framework of the Latin municipal system. Promoted by the emperor Hadrian, and known by the jurist Gaius as *Latium maius*, this consisted of granting *ciuitas Romana* to all of the *municipes Latini* who accessed the *ordo*

*decurionum* or, as already established by the *Latium minus*, a civic magistrature.<sup>21</sup> According to the available sources, this measure does not seem to have been applied generally and automatically in the *municipia Latina* of *Hispania*, but instead, as can be read between the lines from epigraphic evidence preserved in Africa,<sup>22</sup> it would have been introduced individually in the peregrine and previous Latin communities at their own request.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the Hispanian *municipia Flauia*, it seems quite likely that they could have benefited from it, considering an inscription in the *municipium Latinum* of *Ilugo* in which can be read *conditor* or *restitutor municipii*.<sup>24</sup> This would have brought about an accelerated rate of romanisation amongst the Latin municipal elites (some of which, as in the case of *Ilugo*, took the *nomen Aelius*),<sup>25</sup> and may have contributed towards an increased number of dignitaries who were uninterested in holding local government posts once they had obtained the Roman citizenship.

In the case of the second one, obtaining the Roman citizenship and having significant wealth to meet the required levels would have allowed the members of the Latin municipal elites to access, within the framework of *potestas censoria* of the Emperor, the *ordo equester* or *ordo senatorius*.<sup>26</sup> The case of *M. Fidius [Macer]*, from the *municipium Flauium* of *Capera*, is an excellent example of what must have been the usual rate of promoting municipal dignitaries in the *ciuitas Romana* and the *ordines superiores*.<sup>27</sup> With a presumably peregrine origin, he would have formed part of the local elite prior to the application of the *Latium*, from which moment he served as *duumvir* on several occasions. Then, after paying with his own money for the construction of a monumental building, came to form a part of the *ordo equester*. Thus, the municipal administration and membership of the *ordo decurionum* would have passed to a second tier.

As regards the third key aspect, and partly as a result of the second one, the members of the municipal elites who formed part of the *ordo equester* and the *ordo senatorius* were excluded from the *munera* and the local *honores* for the granting of *inmunitas*.<sup>28</sup> The result was to inflict a major blow on the cohesion of the governing groups, as the existence of a system of exemptions led to an unequal share-out of responsibilities amongst the local elites, with the rest of the less wealthy families having to take over the running of the Latin municipal system, without the cooperation of the more affluent members of society. Therefore, the sense of civic solidarity of this group would have been affected, increasing the possibility of behaviours that fled of complying with municipal duties at both an economic and administrative level.

Also, the entry of dignitaries from *Hispania* in the *ordines superiores* may well have brought about a change with fatal consequences for the economic and social life of their communities of origin. Apart from leading to the loss of property by individuals without direct heirs (such as *Cornelius Nigrinus* or *Licinius Sura*),<sup>29</sup> from Trajan's time it became mandatory for senators of provincial origin to acquire up to one third of their assets in properties in Rome and Italy<sup>30</sup>, with the subsequent loss of wealth for the communities of origin, and the obvious financial imbalance for their elites. Occasionally, this situation worsened due to the migration of the remaining elites to most dynamic towns.<sup>31</sup>

As regards the fourth and final possible cause, the interlinking and, in some cases, coincidence of adverse natural phenomena (such as earthquakes, floods, fires, droughts, and epidemics),<sup>32</sup> periods of recurring violence as a result of incursions by groups of outsiders (such as the *Mauri* in 171–177 AD, and the *Franci* or *Germani* in 260–272 AD),<sup>33</sup> together with military uprisings and political conflicts (such as the one protagonised by Clodius Albinus and Septimius Severus in 196–197 AD),<sup>34</sup> would have acted as a breeding ground for a demographic crisis, a quick deterioration of the urban living conditions and the likely appearance of a gradual desire to live and seek refuge in the territory of the towns. Added to this is the difficult situation for economic sectors such as industry, trade, and mining since the middle or end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusions

The change in mentality and values that occurred in the *municipia Latina* of *Hispania*, which in some cases could be extended to other types of Roman towns and provinces, would therefore have led to the members of the municipal elites no longer feeling the need to continue publicly demonstrating their *amor civicus*, their *amor patriae*,<sup>36</sup> through their munificent behaviour and the municipal administration, most likely because the *existimatio* it provided would no longer have yielded any political gain.<sup>37</sup> Instead, the love of the Emperor would have meant much more for the wealthy members of the Roman towns, than the praise of their fellow citizens.<sup>38</sup> The honour and prestige that they had previously acquired by serving the *civitas* were now obtained through service to the Empire.<sup>39</sup>

The rest of the community, exhausted by economic difficulties, and in some cases overwhelmed by the need of greater contributions to the municipal *decus* and *dignitas*, would have started to note a lack of interest in the management of public affairs, and to lay the bases of the crisis that affected the Roman city model.<sup>40</sup> The Latin municipal system, subject to a high level of stress, and without the necessary economic and social foundations, could have been very weak. In the words of F. Jacques, “*dans la première grande crise qui assaille le monde romain, le beau décor municipal se révèle de stuc et de carton*”.<sup>41</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This work has been carried out within the research projects “Nuevas bases documentales para el estudio histórico de la Hispania romana de época republicana: onomástica y latinidad (III–I a.C.)” (HAR2015/66463-P) and “De *municipia Latina* a *oppida labentia*: sobre la sostenibilidad económica e institucional el expediente municipal latino en Hispania (siglos I–III d.C.)” (HAR2016/74854-P), as well as the research groups “Ciudades Romanas” (UCM/930692/HIST) and “Síncrisis. Investigación en Formas Culturais” (GI-1919).

<sup>2</sup> As is well known, the formal disappearance of the *municipium Latinum* happened in 212/213 AD by the enactment of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.

<sup>3</sup> CIL II/2/5, 871 (Cañete la Real, Málaga); CILA II, 1052 (Villanueva del Río y Minas, Sevilla); HEp 15, 330 (El Saucejo, Sevilla).

<sup>4</sup> These differences have been underlined by scholars such as Mata 2014 and Romero 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Gurt 2000; Gómez Espelosín 2006; Diarte 2012; Vaquerizo et al. 2014; Ramallo – Quevedo 2014; Mata 2014; Brassous – Quevedo 2015; Andreu 2017.

<sup>6</sup> The instability situation arising from the political, economic and social impact of the crisis of the municipia Latina could have affected the general balance of large territories, causing problems in other kinds of Roman towns by a possible contagion effect.

<sup>7</sup> Alföldy 1998, 27; Mata 2014, 243; Andreu – Delage 2017, 346–349. 367.

<sup>8</sup> Garnsey 1974; Sillières 1993; Alföldy 1998; Mata 2014; Andreu – Delage 2017.

<sup>9</sup> A general overview can be found in Alföldy 1998; Witschel 2009; Mata 2014; Andreu – Delage 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Melchor 1994, 78-81; Alföldy 1998, 24 f. 30; Mata 2014, 223. 241.

<sup>11</sup> All of them have been studied by scholars such as Garnsey 1974, Jacques 1984, Alföldy 1998, Witschel 2009, Melchor 2013. 2017. 2018, Mata 2014, Andreu – Delage 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Melchor 1994, 79. 81; Alföldy 1998, 22 f. 25.

<sup>13</sup> As an example, the authorities from Nicomedia spent substantial financial resources for the building of an aqueduct (Plin. Ep. 10, 37).

<sup>14</sup> Alföldy 1998, 24 f.; Mata 2014, 223; Andreu – Delage 2017, 368.

<sup>15</sup> CILA II, 339 (Santiponce, Sevilla): ll. 16-18.

<sup>16</sup> SHA, Marc. 11, 7; Alföldy 1998, 26.

<sup>17</sup> CIL II, 4514 (Barcelona). Different interpretation has been suggested by Melchor 2017, 228 f.

<sup>18</sup> CIL II/2/5, 308 (Cabra, Córdoba); CIL II/2/5, 292 (Rute, Córdoba).

<sup>19</sup> On the *ius Latii*, Asc. In Pis. 3 Cl; Str. 4, 1, 12; Gai. Inst. 1, 96; Irr. 21 (HEp 15, 2006, 330: El Saucejo, Sevilla); Salp. 21 (CIL II, 1963: Utrera, Sevilla); Lamberti 1993; García Fernández 2001; Andreu 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Sherwin-White 1973, 343 n. 3.

<sup>21</sup> On the *ius Latii maius*, SHA, Hadr. 21, 7; Gai, Inst. 1, 96; Sherwin-White 1973, 255; Zahrnt 1989a; Andreu 2004, 11; Bravo 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Sherwin-White 1973, 254 f. 361; Zahrnt 1989a; Jacques 1990, 39–41.

<sup>23</sup> Luraschi 1979, 322; Jacques 1990, 39–41.

<sup>24</sup> CIL II, 3239 (Santiesteban del Puerto, Jaén); Zahrnt 1989b; González-Conde 2015, 226–229.

<sup>25</sup> HEp 7, 362 (Beas de Segura, Jaén).

<sup>26</sup> Caballos 1990; Alföldy 1998, 17 f. 22.

<sup>27</sup> AE 2002, 705 (Oliva de Plasencia, Cáceres).

<sup>28</sup> Melchor 2013, 235 f.; 2017, 224–228.

<sup>29</sup> Alföldy 1998, 28 f.

<sup>30</sup> Plin. Ep. 6, 19, 4. This requirement was mitigated by Marcus Aurelius: SHA, Marc. 11, 8; Alföldy 1998, 29 f.

<sup>31</sup> Alföldy 1998, 27–29.

<sup>32</sup> For an overview on these phenomena, SHA, Marc. 13, 3-6; Eutr. 8, 12, 2; SHA, Verus 8, 1–2; Amm. Marc. 23, 6, 23–24; Duncan-Jones 1996; Monterroso 2002; Fears 2004; Nicols 2007; Gozalbes – García García 2007; Rossignol 2012; Quevedo – Ramallo 2015; Arteaga et al. 2015; Silva et al. 2016; Ruiz-Bueno 2017; Andreu – Delage 2017, 365 f.

- <sup>33</sup> On these incursions, SHA, Marc. 21, 1; SHA, Seu. 2, 2-3; Aur. Vict. Caes. 33, 3; Eutr. 9, 8, 2; Oros. 7, 22, 7-8; Oros. 7, 41, 2; Alföldy 1998, 21 and 26; Witschel 2009, 477 f. 480 f.; Mata 2014, 239.
- <sup>34</sup> For an overview on the Septimius Severus' repression, SHA, Seu. 12, 1. 5; SHA, Seu. 13, 7; RIT 130; Witschel 2009, 479; Mata 2014, 224. 237; Ventura 2017, 473-478; Andreu – Delage 2017, 365.
- <sup>35</sup> On this matter, Alföldy 1998, 25; Chic 2005; Andreu 2017, 365 f.
- <sup>36</sup> Brown 2016, 140. 162.
- <sup>37</sup> Andreu – Delage 2017, 368.
- <sup>38</sup> Brown 2016, 165.
- <sup>39</sup> Melchor 1994, 80 f.
- <sup>40</sup> Garnsey 1974; Melchor 1994, 81; Alföldy 1998, 22 f. 25.
- <sup>41</sup> Jacques 1984, VIII.

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