

The Antonine Edict:
Combined Motivations Behind the Citizenship Grant

Research Thesis

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by

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The third century of the Roman Empire gained its notoriety from a series of crises that began with Severus Septimius's accession to the imperial seat. Under the Severan emperors, Rome became unrecognizable. The Severans changed how Rome as a conquering empire functioned and how the inhabitants living within the empire identified. The largest reform of the Severan Dynasty belongs to Severus Septimius's son Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Augustus, often referred to as Caracalla. While emperor, Caracalla enacted the *Constitutio Antoniniana* in 212 CE, one of the most revolutionary law edicts of antiquity. The Antonine Edict granted Roman citizenship to the entirety of the Roman Empire and decreed an empire wide thanksgiving to the gods. Both ancient and modern historians theorize about the motivations behind the law edict and the short and long term effects it created. Like many pivotal events within the third century, weighing the *Constitutio Antoniniana* as positive or negative depends on the perspective of the reader.

Caracalla was the second emperor of the Severan Dynasty, an imperial lineage that began with his father Septimius Severus in 193CE. The Severans won their imperial seat through military strength, though Septimius Severus later claimed the previous emperor Marcus Aurelius was his father to add legitimacy to his claim.¹ During the end of the second and beginning of the third century Rome experienced a series of civil wars, border disputes, and plague.² Septimius Severus had a difficult time winning the throne and spent his reign stabilizing the empire.³ Though Septimius Severus briefly ruled with Clodius Albinus, he named his sons as heirs early

¹ Michael Grant, *The Severans: The Changed Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1996), 18.

² Olivier Hekster and Nicholas Zair, *Rome and Its Empire, AD 193-284 (Debates and Documents in Ancient History)* (Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 6.

³ Grant, *The Severans*, 13.

in his reign.⁴ Caracalla was raised to the rank of Caesar by his father in 196 CE and became joint consuls with Septimius Severus in 202 CE.⁵ Septimius intended to pass the throne to Caracalla and his brother Geta, to jointly rule. The brothers ruled together briefly before Caracalla infamously murdered Geta towards the end of 211 CE.⁶ Caracalla returned Rome to an autocracy and ruled alone until he was assassinated in 217 CE.⁷ The *Constitutio Antoniniana* was written less than a year after the assassination of Geta, in 212 CE.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possible motivations behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana* and analyze how the edict was received by the pluralistic societies in the Roman Empire. First, I will conduct a close reading of the edict and contemporary sources that reference the Antonine Edict and discuss modern debate on these sources. Second, I will define what a pluralistic society is and how Rome was made up of multiple individual societies that were diversely affected by the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. Next, I will review the most convincing ancient and modern theories on motivation behind the CA. Lastly, I will propose an extension on common theories and show how analyzing them together versus individually allows a broader understanding.

It is important to explore the potential theories of motivation behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana* for a multitude of reasons. The most prominent reason being the scale of influence the edict had on the Roman Empire. This law code effected every inhabitant of the empire, regardless of previous status. Additionally, for a law code of such influence, there is very little contemporary commentary on the edict. To better understand the empire at this time in history,

⁴ Ibid, 11.

⁵ Ibid, 19.

⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁷ Ibid, 22.

Cassius Dio claims the assassination was arranged by Caracalla's successor, Macrinus, at the hand of a soldier.

specifically what events led up to the enactment of such an unprecedented law, it is useful to review sources outside of Rome. Hekster and Zair encourage the emphasis of change and transformation in the third century, versus solely focusing on the crises.⁸ The growth and relocation of imperial power outside of Rome during this time demonstrates transformation. By incorporating provincial sources, the full picture behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana* becomes clearer.

The *Constitutio Antoniniana*

Prior to the discovery of an Egyptian papyrus, known as Papyrus Gissensis 40, the *Constitutio Antoniniana* survived antiquity solely through brief contemporary commentary. The papyrus was first acquired by Giessen University in 1901 and published by Paul Meyer in 1910.⁹ The first of the three edicts within the document is believed to be a translation of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* enacted by Caracalla between the years 212-215 CE. Dating the CA has remained a debate amongst historians, though due to new evidence it is widely accepted that the edict followed the death of Geta in 211 CE and reached publication in the middle of 212 CE.¹⁰ Papyrus Gissensis, known as *P. Giss. 40*, is largely accepted to be a fragmented portion of a Greek translation of the original Latin imperial edict. Bryen states, “The most important feature of *P. Giss. I 40* is that, while it preserves official information, it is not an official document – that is, it is not a certified copy of the emperor’s edicts.”¹¹ The certainty that the papyrus is a translation, and the fragmentation of the document has kept discourse continuous since its discovery.

⁸ Hekster and Zair, *Rome and its Empire*, 84.

⁹ Ari Z. Bryen, “Reading the Citizenship Papyrus (P. Giss. 40),” in *Citizenship and Empire in Europe 200-1900 the Antonine Constitution after 1800 Years*, ed. Clifford Ando (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016), pp. 29-43, 29.

¹⁰ Alex Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution an Edict for the Caracallan Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 44.

¹¹ Bryen, “Reading the Citizenship Papyrus”, 37.

The most prominent debate concerns the translation of the papyrus, and the proposed restoration of the missing sections. To better understand the surviving text, contemporary sources to the *Constitutio Antoniniana* are useful. The jurist Ulpian's comment, "*in orbe romano qui sunt ex constitutione imperatoris Antonini cives Romani effecti sunt.*"¹², though brief it provides a succinct explanation of the edict. The historian Cassius Dio's more extensive accounts on Caracalla and his edict are significant, though most scholars reference his writings with caution. The historian's dislike and bias against the emperor is well documented. Herodian's comments on the emperor and Antonine Edict are similarly regarded. In addition to written contemporary sources, recent restorations of the edict have utilized the *Tabula Banasitana*. The bronze Tabula of Banasa was discovered in Morocco in 1957 and contain imperial letters from the late second century CE that granted individuals Roman citizenship.¹³ The tabula contains a formulaic pattern for documents granting citizenship, providing a potential route for the missing components of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.

The discovery of the *Tabula Banasitana* has led to recent development in the restoration of *P. Giss. 40*. Paul Meyer proposed the word $\delta\epsilon\delta\epsilon\iota\tau\kappa\iota\omega\nu$, or *dediticii* in Latin, to fill a fragmentary portion of the ninth line within the first translation and restoration of the *CA*. Though the proposed word fits within the lacuna of the line, syntactically there is no evidence for this proposed restoration beyond its genitive form. Most restorations include $\delta\epsilon\delta\epsilon\iota\tau\kappa\iota\omega\nu$, including F. M. Heichelheim's publication in 1941, a full revision of the restoration.¹⁴ Similarly, A.N. Sherwin-White utilizes $\delta\epsilon\delta\epsilon\iota\tau\kappa\iota\omega\nu$ in their restoration of the *CA* that he analyzed alongside

¹² Ulpian, *Digest*, 1.5.17.

¹³ Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution an Edict for the Caracallan Empire*, 147-148.

¹⁴ F. M. Heichelheim, "The Text of the 'Constitutio Antoniniana' and the Three Other Decrees of the Emperor Caracalla Contained in Papyrus Gissensis 40," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26 (1941): pp. 10-22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3854517>, 10.

the *Tabula Banasitana*.¹⁵ Recent scholarship rejects the use of *δεδεικτων*, predominately due to the unlikelihood that Caracalla would explicitly exclude one small faction of people.

Though historians have questioned the mention of the *dedicci* for decades, it wasn't until the discovery of the Tabula of Banasa that a substitution with precedent was proposed. In 2018 Alex Imrie published a restoration and translation that implemented language used in the *tabula*. Instead of completing the “χωρις” prepositional phrase with *δεδεικτων*, Imrie supplied *ἀδδεικτων*.¹⁶ Imrie claims the Latin phrase “*sine diminutione tributorum et vectigalium populi et fisci*” from the *tabula* shows a similarity with the CA, allowing a similar reconstruction of the eighth and ninth lines.¹⁷ Arnaud Besson arrives at the same conclusion, citing the implausibility of *δεδεικτων*.¹⁸ This revision of the text aligns with Ulpian's passing notation of the CA, which was free of exceptions to the universal citizenship grant. Imrie's monograph of the Antonine Constitution includes the most plausible Greek restoration and English translation of the edict.¹⁹ For the purposes of this paper I will reference his translation and restoration of the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. The Greek passage and English translation are transcribed below:

1) [Αὐτοκράτωρ Καῖσαρ Μάρκο[ς Α]ὐρή[λιος Σεουήρος Ἀ]ντωνῖνο[ς] Ε[ὐσεβή]ς λέγει
[πάντως εἰς τὸ θεῖον χρῆ] μᾶλλον ἀν[αφέρειν καὶ τὰ]ς αἰτίας κ[α]ὶ [λογι]σμοὺς
[δικαίως δ' ἂν κἀγὼ τοῖς θεοῖς τ[οῖς] ἀθ[αν]άτοις εὐχαριστήσα[ι]μι ὅτι τῆς
τοιαύτη[ς]
[ἐπιβουλῆς γενομένης σῶ]ν ἐμὲ συν[ε]τήρησαν τοιγαροῦν νομίζω [ο]ὔτω με –
5) [γαλοπρεπῶς καὶ εὐσεβ]ῶς δύ[να]σθαι τῇ μεγαλειότητι αὐτῶν το ἰκανὸν ποι –
[εῖν, εἰ τοὺς ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ ὅσ]άκις ἐὰν ὑ[πε]ισέλθ[ωσ]ιν εἰς τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἀν[θρ]
ώπους
[ὡς Ῥωμαίους εἰς τὰ ἱερὰ τῶν] θεῶν συνει[σ]ενέγκ[οιμ]ι Δίδω[μ]ι τοί[ν]υν ἅπα –

¹⁵ A. N. Sherwin-White, “The Tabula of Banasa and the Constitutio Antoniniana,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 63 (1973): pp. 86-98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/299168>, 95-96.

¹⁶ Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution an Edict for the Caracallan Empire*, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 148.

¹⁸ Arnaud Besson, *Constitutio Antoniniana L'universalisation De La Citoyenneté Romaine Au 3E Siècle* (Basel: Schwabe Verlagsgruppe AG Schwabe Verlag, 2020), 43.

¹⁹ Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution an Edict for the Caracallan Empire*, 40-41.

[σι τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν οἰκουμένην π[ολιτ]εῖαν Ῥωμ[αί]ων [μ]ένοντος
 [τοῦ δικαίου τῶν πολιτευμ]άτων χωρ[ίς] τῶν [ἀδδ]ειτικίων Ὁ[φ]εῖλει [γ]ὰρ τὸ
 10) [πλῆθος οὐ μόνον τᾶλλα συνυπομέ]νειν πάντα ἀ[λλ]ὰ ἤδη κ[α]ὶ τῆ νίκη ἐνπεριεῖ –
 [λῆφθαι Τοῦτο δὲ τὸ διάτ]αγμα ἐ[ξ]απ[λ]ώσει [τὴν] μεγαλειότητα [το]ῦ Ῥωμ[αί]ων
 [δῆμου συμβαίνει γὰρ τὴν αὐτὴ]ν περὶ τοῦς [ἄλλο]υς γεγενῆσθα[ι] ἥπερ δι[ι]α –
 [πρέπουσιν ἀνέκαθεν Ῥωμ[αί]οι τιμῆ κα]ταλειφ[θέντων μηδέν]ων τῶ[ν] ἐκάστης
 [χώρας ἐν οἰκουμένη ἀπολιτεῦτων ἢ ἀτιμ]ήτω[ν Ἄπο δὲ τῶν] π[ρ]οσ[ό]δων
 τῶν νῦν]
 15) [ὑπερχουσῶν συντελούντων, ἅπερ ἐκελεύσ]θη [παρὰ Ῥωμ[αί]ων ἀπὸ τοῦ κα
 ἔτους.]
 [ὡς δίκαιον ἐκ τῶν διαταγμάτων καὶ ἐπιστολ]ῶ[ν, ἃ ἐξεδόθη ὑφ’ ἡμῶν τε]
 [καὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων προγόνων Προετέθη]

The Emperor Caesar Marcus Aurelius Severus Antoninus Pius decrees:
 It is altogether necessary to attribute the causes and reasons [of recent events] to the divine. I, personally, would rightly thank the immortal gods, since although such a conspiracy [as that of Geta] has occurred, they have watched over me and protected me. I think that I am able, both magnificently and piously, to do something fitting to the gods' majesty, if I manage to bring [all] those in the empire, who constitute my people, to the temples of the gods as Romans. I therefore give everyone in the Roman world the Roman citizenship: preserving customary law, without additional privileges. It is necessary for the masses not only to share in our burden, but also to be included in victory. This decree will spread the magnificence of the Roman people. For it now happens that the same greatness has occurred for everyone, by the honour in which the Romans have been preeminent since time immemorial, with no-one from any country in the world being left stateless or without honour. Referring to the taxes that exist at present, all are due to pay those that have been imposed upon the Romans from the beginning of their twenty-first year [of age], as it is the law, according to the edicts and rescripts issued by us and our ancestors. Displayed publically...

Authorship of the edict is highly contested. Williams claims that the edict is written in a personal style and believes Caracalla to have composed the edict himself.²⁰ This claim is interesting due to the council that often supported the emperor in similar tasks. This council was typically full of jurists and legal experts, a profession that excelled in the third century and held great influence over the empire.²¹ Additionally, Williams believes the edict was written by the

²⁰ W. Williams, "Caracalla and the Authorship of Imperial Edicts and Epistles." *Latomus* 38, no. 1 (1979): 67–89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41531130>, 71.

²¹ Grant, *The Severans*, 52.

emperor from the content regarding the event that Caracalla escaped from, prompting his thanksgiving to the gods.²² This theory would follow the logic that the emperor wrote a reactionary law after a near death event, potentially surpassing the assistance of his council to compose the edict. Most historians accept this event to be the conflict that led to the death of Geta. Because of how this personal matter is delivered within the edict, Imrie theorizes that the edict was written by the emperor with the guidance of his council.²³ Definitive authorship of the edict remains undetermined and will likely remain at an impasse until further evidence is found.

In addition to the discourse over the previously mentioned aspects of the edict, the papyrus as a material source has sparked the interest of historians. Questions surrounding the original owner and circumstances of the document prompt historians to gain information about this specific source. It is theorized that the owner of the papyrus was wealthy, due to the ability to have the edicts transcribed.²⁴ Heichelheim proposed that the papyrus was likely used for the legal claims of a private person.²⁵ Bryen also speculates that the papyrus was from someone who transitioned from subject to citizen.²⁶ Due to the location the papyrus was discovered and the language it was translated into, the owner of the document may have lived in or was returning to Egypt shortly after the edicts were published. Besson theorizes that the collection of law codes may have been for more than a singular person's use.²⁷ Heichelheim, Bryen, and Besson attempt to use not only the content within the source, but also the speculated origins and motivations of the original owner of the source to better understand the *CA* and other laws from *P. Giss. 40*.

²² Williams, "Caracalla and the Authorship of Imperial Edicts and Epistles.", 71.

²³ Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution*, 36-37.

²⁴ Heichelheim, "The Text of the "Constitutio Antoniniana" and the Three Other Decrees", 22.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

²⁶ Bryen, "Reading the Citizenship Papyrus", 31.

²⁷ Besson, *Constitutio Antoniniana L'Universalisation de la Citoyennete Romaine*, 34.

Although the Antonine Edict granted an unprecedented number of subjects citizenship, the edict clarified that the grant was not without cost. The new citizens of the Roman Empire were expected to be tax paying and pious citizens. At the time of publication, the edict would have granted citizenship to millions of inhabitants.²⁸ The edict specified that those who now qualified as citizens would have been expected to pay the same taxes as current citizens, beginning in their twenty first year of age.²⁹ Additionally, these new citizens were to join the empire in worshipping the Roman pagan gods. Caracalla claimed the action of granting citizenship is both from being thankful to the gods for protecting him, and supplication to the gods by leading Romans to their temples. The tone of the edict indicated that Caracalla believed in divine intervention, specifically in his claim that the gods were responsible for events.³⁰ It is evident that Caracalla wished for the grandeur of the gods to be understood, and in relation to these gods, the grandeur of his edict. The *Constitutio Antoniniana* was not the first large scale sacrifice to the gods ordered by an emperor,³¹ but it is the first universal grant of citizenship. Remaining consistent with scholarship surrounding this edict, the impact and influence of the law are heavily debated.

The Pluralistic Societies of Rome

The sociological concept of pluralism is explained by Clifford Ando as being, “in any given space, multiple bodies of law, deriving from discrete sources, and multiple institutions of dispute resolution, potentially held authority over any given issue.”³² When applying the concept

²⁸ See Lavan (2016).

²⁹ Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution*, 41.

³⁰ Ibid, 41.

³¹ Paul Keresztes, “The Constitutio Antoniniana and the Persecutions under Caracalla,” *The American Journal of Philology* 91, no. 4 (1970): p. 446, <https://doi.org/10.2307/293084>, 456.

³² J., Du Plessis Paul, et al. “Legal Pluralism in Practice.” *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, United Kingdom, 2020, p. 283.

of pluralism to the Roman Empire, it is necessary to view law and religion as the two main congruent entities of government. Pluralism in this context is defined better as multiple legal or religious institutions functioning simultaneously within the same physical boundary. Public law covered the scope of administration, religion, and how the political community functioned within the empire.³³ The Roman legal system was dependent upon religion, citing pagan gods as witnesses, enforcing agents, and grantors of power throughout written law. In many ways the gods were regarded as legal actors. Local and imperial structures of law and religion coexisted throughout Roman territories. The balance of these systems was often determined by Roman provincial governments.

At the time of Caracalla's reign, the Roman empire spanned the entirety of the Mediterranean and covered large portions of Northwest modern-day Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The empire was made up of Roman territories, client states, and provinces. Each client state and province maintained elements of their local law and religion regardless of their integration into the empire. Jones states, "The autonomy of the provincial communities was not merely 'tolerated.' It was granted, regulated and guaranteed by the *lex provinciae*."³⁴ The integration of imperial law and religion with local law traditions varied by region, dependent upon citizenship status and the local justice system. The varied integration allowed legal pluralism to exist in these communities, and by extension religious pluralism. The pluralistic nature resulted in a diverse impact of the Antonine Edict throughout Rome and its provinces and territories.

³³ Rafael Domingo. "Basic Legal Concepts and Values." *Roman Law an Introduction*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2018, p. 9.

³⁴ A. H. Jones, "Another Interpretation of the 'Constitutio Antoniniana,'" *Journal of Roman Studies* 26, no. 2 (1936): pp. 223-235, <https://doi.org/10.2307/296867>, 229.

Rome had a history of granting “autonomy” to conquered territories, allowing the use of local laws and religious activities to remain.³⁵ The determining factor of how much local agency a province or territory was granted laid with the governor or Roman official in charge of the region. According to Keresztes, “much depended on the attitude of the provincial magistrates, whose zeal or moderation could mean the difference between persecution, however local, and toleration.”³⁶ Though pluralism in both legal and religious contexts resulted in inhabitants practicing traditions and religion outside of the empire norms, some of these practices were not viewed favorably by the provincial governments. The delegation of governing duties to appointed government officials allowed these administrators to have discretion on how local law and religion was tolerated.

While many governors and state appointed officials allowed these pluralistic approaches into government, some enforced law closer aligned with the empire or their personal politics. Keresztes cites a case where the persecution of Christians in Carthage greatly varied from one governor to the next.³⁷ Christians under the governor Scapula were persecuted violently in mass numbers, compared to the peaceful period of his predecessor Pudens. The opposing sentences of the governors show how much choice the officials held in their judgements for their respective provinces. The cases that had local agency revoked often dealt with issues that became a matter of public notice and gained the attention of Roman authorities.³⁸ Due to the discretion allotted to the provincial governments, levels of pluralism are dependent on local leadership and location within the empire.

³⁵ J., Du Plessis Paul, et al., “Legal Pluralism in Practice.”, 285.

³⁶ Keresztes, “The Constitutio Antoniniana and the Persecutions under Caracalla.”, 449.

³⁷ Ibid, 449.

³⁸ Andrea Jördens, “Aequum Et Custom: The Law in Egypt,” in *Law in the Roman Provinces* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 19-31, 20-21.

To comprehend the magnitude of this edict and its effect on a pluralistic Roman society, it is important to understand Roman citizenship. Prior to 212 CE, unless one was born into the status, Roman citizenship was granted to a select few. One could obtain the status of citizen in several ways, including citizenship granted to a manumitted slave by a Roman citizen, automatic promotion of men who held magistracies in communities granted Latin rights, certain military service, or the grant of citizenship by the emperor either in a group or individually.³⁹ Before the Antonine Edict, citizenship was used for political pacification.⁴⁰ Utilizing the grant of citizenship as a reward for military service helped increase enlistment into the auxiliary forces. Certain territories or high ranking members of a province were granted citizenship by the emperor when it benefited his cause. Caracalla's mass grant of citizenship profoundly changed the status structure of Rome. Bryen comments, "...citizenship, that is, was a status that ranked its recipient above his neighbors. When everyone has citizenship, however, there is no need to rank people relative to one another."⁴¹ Though Rome continued to work on a caste structured system, the Antonine Edict eliminated the most dividing component.

Regardless of citizen status, government looked different throughout the empire. Lavan states, "Before the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, Roman citizens could be subject to non-Roman legal systems in non-Roman communities, Roman courts developed ways of bringing non-citizens under Roman law and various non-citizen communities chose to adopt and adapt some Roman legal forms for their own purposes."⁴² Many legal issues outside of Rome were dealt with in local courts. Provinces operated on the assize system, creating the need for more frequent and

³⁹ Lavan, "The Spread of Roman Citizenship", 8.

⁴⁰ G.C.J.J. van den Bergh, "Legal Pluralism in Roman Law", *Irish Jurist* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1969): 338-350, 343.

⁴¹ Bryen, "Reading the Citizenship Papyrus", 40.

⁴² *Ibid*, 34.

obtainable forms of government.⁴³ The lack of Roman government officials within the provinces created the opening for local options. Ando states, “Both political considerations and limitations on state infrastructural power urged the Romans to allow the use of local norms in local courts.”⁴⁴ Citizenship or lack of citizenship within the empire existed as more than a political category, it dually existed as a cultural category.⁴⁵

Pluralism is important when analyzing the impact of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* because it shows that the impact was not linear throughout the empire. While the grant of universal citizenship was important, it was not the only polarizing factor for inhabitants of the empire. Bryen states, “...the mere possession of citizenship did not somehow make all citizens *the* same in terms of the privileges or rights conferred...”⁴⁶ Each Roman province had varying degrees of Roman-ness, from law to religion. Evidence of this merge is frequently found in provincial art and statues. Common examples include a Roman emperor depicted as a pharaoh in Egypt or coinage depicting the emperor engaging with local gods in Asia Minor. Rome held authority over law and order throughout the empire, but often custom was a dominant factor on how each province was governed. The Antonine Edict was the first imperial law to include each inhabitant and regard the empire as a unified Rome regardless of the inhabitant’s location within the empire. The edict forced each member of the empire to adjust their perception of Roman identity.

Motivation Behind the Antonine Edict

Motivation behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana* typically falls within two categories. Cassius Dio presented the first, claiming that Caracalla’s motive was financial and enacted the

⁴³ See Burton (1975)

⁴⁴ Plessis, Ando, and Tuori, *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*, 19.

⁴⁵ Bryen, “Reading the Citizenship Papyrus”, 34.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 34.

citizenship grant to generate tax revenue.⁴⁷ The second is that the emperor was motivated by religious reasons, prompting the empire wide *supplicatio* to the gods. Both popular motives are documented within the papyrus in some capacity.⁴⁸ Regardless of written motive, modern scholars debate the motivation behind the edict, utilizing contemporary context and sources to theorize what might have prompted the radical law. The fragmented document, fallibility of historical sources, and paucity of contemporary evidence regarding the *CA* has encouraged an extensive list of potential motives to help understand the vague intention cited for the law.

Beginning with the oldest source contemplating the motivations behind the *CA*, the senator Cassius Dio claimed Caracalla created the edict to raise tax revenues. The senator reasoned that all the new citizens would have to pay taxes that they previously were exempt from when they were *peregrini*. The specific tax Dio references is the *Vicesima Hereditatum*, which the senator claimed was doubled from five to ten percent.⁴⁹ Most scholarship argues that the inheritance tax would not have generated enough revenue for this to be the main motive behind the law due to the idea that wealthy provincials already held citizenship. Cassius Dio gave a hostile account of the emperor's life, and the most critical books were likely published about the emperor posthumously.⁵⁰ Caracalla's relationship with the Senate throughout his reign was poor. Cassius Dio's attempt to paint Caracalla's edict in a negative light was a byproduct of this. Although increased tax revenues were a likely benefit of the edict, it is unlikely that it was the sole motivating force behind the legislation.

⁴⁷Cassius Dio 78.9.

⁴⁸ *P. Giss. 40 I*, l. 2-4; 15-17.

⁴⁹ Dio 78.9.4.

⁵⁰ Besson, *Constitutio Antoniniana L'universalisation de la Citoyennete Romaine*, 25.

As previously stated, the emperor cited religion as his motivating force behind the *CA*. While Paul Keresztes theorizes that the *Constitutio Antoniniana* was likely not in any way directed against Christians, the edict did negatively affect them.⁵¹ Keresztes claims that the *CA* legalized the persecution of Christians.⁵² Prior to 212 CE only citizens could be persecuted for Christianity, though many accounts show both citizens and non-citizens were persecuted regardless of legality.⁵³ Theoretically, the edict attempted to direct the new populace of citizens to the pagan gods' temples and supplicate to them. This would target those who were practicing Christians since they refused to partake in sacrifice. Keresztes also claims that the *Constitutio* formalized the loss of a citizen's right to appeal to the emperor on account of social distinctions between the *honestiores* and the *humiliores*.⁵⁴ I agree with Keresztes on the theory that the *CA* was not written with the intent to harm Christians in the Roman Empire. The treatment of Christians at this time was dependent on a variety of factors, such as location and specific Christian sect. Although the edict impacted religious groups outside of traditional Roman religion, it is not likely that this was the emperor's intention.

W. Williams adheres to the most traditional religiously motivated theory behind Caracalla's edict, which is to accept the edict as it was written. Williams argues that the edict seems to have been reactionary to the event that prompted saving from the gods.⁵⁵ On his deep analysis of the text, Williams states that the text seems personally written by the emperor and reflective of the emperor's personal attitudes.⁵⁶ Although the edict does appear to be written by Caracalla, it seems unlikely that an edict of this magnitude would not be under the advisement of

⁵¹ Keresztes, "The *Constitutio Antoniniana* and the Persecutions Under Caracalla, 450.

⁵² *Ibid*, 450.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 450.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 450.

⁵⁵ Williams, "Caracalla and the Authorship of the Imperial Edicts and Epistles", 71.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 71.

his council of legal experts to some extent. Williams also suggests the edict was written on a whim of the emperor.⁵⁷ This theory seems an unlikely motivation of the edict solely because the grant of citizenship to the entire empire is too large of a gesture to be an impulse. While religion is a very possible motivator, this theory is underdeveloped.

Marco Rocco proposes a unique theory, crediting the Roman military as the motivator behind Caracalla's edict. Rocco theorizes that Caracalla's intent was to increase state revenue and use it to supply the army.⁵⁸ Unlike similar ancient criticism regarding taxation, Rocco's theory gives compelling data to support his claim. Aside from the monetary benefit that the *CA* provided the army, the edict authorized an entire empire of men to join the legions. The requirements to join the Roman army as a legionary were to be born of free birth and to be a citizen.⁵⁹ Rocco believes this was Caracalla's motivation behind the edict because the legions were experiencing an enlistment crisis.⁶⁰ Those qualified to enlist in the legions predominantly chose to join the *auxilia*, on account of the less severe conditions in comparison.⁶¹ Potential evidence for his theory could be supported by the large number of Thracians and Pannonians that entered the legions in the early third century.⁶² Rocco, following closer to the Meyer or Heichelheim translations, has a theory for the exclusion of the *dediticii* from citizenship granted in the *CA*. He claims that it was to preserve a certain specialist faction of the army.⁶³ This hypothesis seems plausible due to the military focus prioritized by the Severans. Caracalla

⁵⁷ Ibid, 72.

⁵⁸ Rocco, "The Reasons Behind *Constitutio Antoniniana* and its Effects on the Roman Military, 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁶¹ Ibid, 10.

⁶² Ibid, 12.

⁶³ Ibid, 13.

depended on the army to hold his imperial seat, so creating a larger pool of potential recruits during an enlistment crisis is a convincing theory.

In addition to a thorough translation, Alex Imrie suggests the most reasonable theory of motivation behind the *CA* in his monograph to date. Imrie states, “it is only when the edict is analyzed in a fully embedded context that the relationship between different motivations and pressures bearing on Caracalla in 212 can be properly observed.”⁶⁴ He argued that the edict’s motivations should be analyzed together to understand the full intent. Emphasis is given to fiscal and military motivations, as well as the emperor’s *imitatio* of Alexander the Great. Like Rocco’s theory, Imrie believes the emperor raised tax revenue to supplement the growing military costs. Imrie cited coin debasement and taxation as evidence to support the notion that the Antonine Edict was fiscally motivated.⁶⁵ Using the revenue to fund the military agenda, Imrie proposed that along with endowing the military, the edict removed the obstacles that limited recruitment into the legions.⁶⁶ Imrie’s mention of the *imitatio* is less a motivation and more a political stunt used to associate the emperor with Alexander the Great.⁶⁷ Imrie stated that the compilation of motives behind the Antonine Edict was more than an attempt to divert attention away from the fratricide of Geta, but to install an astute political maneuver that had many advantages.⁶⁸

Previous opinions that view the *Constitutio Antoniniana* through the lens of a singular motive or the whim of an emperor are stagnant. Compiling multiple theories and analyzing how they complement one another allows for a more developed understanding how the edict was intended. Geta’s assassination is believed to have occurred around January or February of 211

⁶⁴ Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution*, 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 82-83.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 99.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 133.

CE.⁶⁹ The *Constitutio Antoniniana* date is contested, but recent scholarship suggests the date July 11, 212 CE.⁷⁰ The gap between these events shows that the law was not enacted without months to consider the ramifications of the edict. Caracalla employed some of the best jurists of the era, such as Ulpian. It is reasonable to assume that the emperor and his council had specific motivation for the edict and that they carefully weighed before presenting it to the public.

Restructuring an Empire and Rebranding the Emperor

The *Constitutio Antoniniana* likely was enacted with most of the previously mentioned motives in mind. Unlike many of the previous theories, the motives of the edict should not be individually considered. I will argue that the Antonine Edict was part of a political plan by Caracalla and his advisors to restructure the governmental system of the Roman Empire and rebrand himself as the supreme deified ruler of the empire. Caracalla's independent reign of Rome lasted a short six years. Within these six years, the emperor methodically plotted to possess all *auctoritas* and *potestas* within the empire. To achieve this level of rule the emperor strategically changed the fundamental aspects of the Roman Empire that would impede this restructured form of government. The *Constitutio Antoniniana* should be viewed within the context of Caracalla's ambition to become the godlike autocratic ruler of Rome to better hypothesize the motivation behind the edict.

Caracalla began his political career at a young age when his father proclaimed him *Caesar* in 196 CE.⁷¹ Until the death of Geta in 211 CE, Caracalla never independently ruled Rome. The majority of his Caesarship was under the rule of his father, Septimius Severus. Caracalla began his restructure of government with the assassination of Geta. Though the

⁶⁹ Grant, *The Severans*, 22.

⁷⁰ Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution*, 44.

⁷¹ Grant, *The Severans*, 18.

premeditated nature of this action is undetermined, the rivalry between the brothers was well documented.⁷² Contemporary sources confirm that Caracalla claimed Geta conspired to kill him.⁷³ The emperor used the *CA* to legitimize his story of surviving Geta's conspiratorial attempts to murder him and mark Geta as an enemy of the state. Geta's assassination allowed Caracalla to return Rome to the rule of a singular emperor.

Throughout the entirety of the imperial period of the Roman Empire, the Senate possessed varying degrees of governing power. Though the emperor was head of state, it was important to keep a relationship between the emperor and members of the Senate. Ando states, "most successful emperors presented themselves in a fashion that kept the peace between themselves and their audiences, and among the audiences themselves."⁷⁴ The power of the Senate peaked during the Republic and was greatly diminished with the creation of the Empire. Though less politically powerful, membership to this body remained a prestigious position socially. The Antonine Edict further diminished the power of the Senate by granting Roman citizenship to millions of provincial inhabitants and encouraging the decentralization of Rome. Caracalla spent much of his reign outside of Rome, specifically touring the provinces. The Senate by law could not assemble more than a mile outside the *pomerium*. This contained the senatorial influence to the physical boundary of Rome while the head of state ruled the empire elsewhere. Additionally, Caracalla did not hold consulship after 213 CE.⁷⁵ With the removal of the emperor as the formal leader of the Senate and dissolving the notion that the emperor resides in Rome, Caracalla further severed ties with the senate and took advantage of their lessened

⁷² Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution*, 113.

⁷³ See both Cassius Dio and Herodian

⁷⁴ Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (University of California, 2013), 26.

⁷⁵ Grant, *The Severans*, 22.

influence. This strengthened his position as the singular person in the empire to possess authority.

A Roman emperor's *imperium* was traditionally sanctioned by the Senate and the inheritance of the position. Caracalla restructured the base of his ruling power away from the tradition of imperial authority granted by the Senate and moved towards military support. Oliver states, "Caracalla learned from his father many important lessons, notably how to deal with troops, and he was certainly influenced by his mother's understanding of the Eastern religious climate."⁷⁶ Like his father Septimius Severus, Caracalla prioritized funds to the military. The emperor's knowledge of the Eastern religious climate will be addressed later. As Hekster and Zair stressed, "emperors had always been aware of the threat that the military could form."⁷⁷ The Severans harnessed the power of the military and utilized their strength to obtain and keep power. During his reign, Caracalla drastically increased the compensation of soldiers, some historians theorizing up to double their pay.⁷⁸ The fiscal motive of the *Constitutio Antoniniana* helped fund the increased size and pay of the military. Following the motive proposed by Imrie and Rocco, the *CA* also granted millions of provincials the authorization to join the legions. Caracalla restructured the Roman military into a large foundation of power, capable of keeping him on the imperial throne.

In addition to restructuring the governmental system of Rome, the *CA* assisted Caracalla in rebranding himself as a divine sovereign. The *Constitutio Antoniniana* worked as a self-granted amnesty for the fratricide of Geta. The edict served as an official declaration to the empire that Geta was the guilty party. Caracalla continued this narrative by sanctioning the

⁷⁶ James H. Oliver, "The Piety of Commodus and Caracalla and the Εἰς Βασιλέα," *Greek and Roman Byzantine Studies* 19, no. 4 (1978): pp. 375-388, 381.

⁷⁷ Olivier Hekster and Nicholas Zair, *Rome and Its Empire*, 38.

⁷⁸ See Develin (1971)

damnatio memoriae of Geta. De Blois claims the radical *damnatio memoriae* was extremely thorough, even erasing Geta's name from papyrus texts.⁷⁹ Numismatic evidence shows that Caracalla stopped aligning himself with the Severan family, the term *domus divina* stopped appearing on Caracalla's coinage in the years 212-217 CE.⁸⁰ Dario Calomino states, "The most apparent result of this change of strategy was the downgrading of Hercules from the prominence gained in the Severan propaganda as a family patron."⁸¹ Imrie reasons that Caracalla did not fully remove himself from association to the Severan line, but solely Geta.⁸² I counter that Caracalla's disassociation from the Severan line aided his plan by minimally reminiscing on the Geta scandal and allowing him to appear as an autonomous ruler outside of the Severan dynasty.

The emperor's provincial tour shows the most evidence for the emperor's depiction as divinity. Calomino proposes three categories for divine Caracallan imagery that appear in the provinces.⁸³ First, the emperor was shown as a "pious emperor". This image evolved into a peer of the gods, and finally became Caracalla as a super-human ruler. By spending most of his reign outside of Rome⁸⁴, Caracalla's rebrand as divinity was able to progress. The emperor's previously mentioned understanding of the political climate in the Eastern provinces aided this effort. The *apotheosis* of an emperor after death was common throughout imperial history, though Romans traditionally did not allow living emperors to identify as living deities. The idea of living emperor gods was occasionally popular in Rome throughout the first century with emperors such as Augustus and Domitian. The concept fell out of popularity during the second

⁷⁹ Lukas de Blois, "The Constitutio Antoniniana (AD 212): Taxes or Religion?", *Mnemosyne* 67, no. 6 (December 2014): pp. 1014-1021, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568525x-12301497>, 1018.

⁸⁰ De Blois, "The Constitutio Antoniniana: Taxes or Religion?", 1016.

⁸¹ Dario Calomino, "Caracalla and the Divine: Emperor Worship and Representation in the Visual Language of Roman Asia Minor," *Anatolian Studies* 70 (2020): pp. 153-179, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0066154620000010>, 173.

⁸² Imrie, *The Antonine Constitution*, 118.

⁸³ Calomino, "Caracalla and the Divine", 173.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 153.

century and was resurrected by Caracalla in the third. Imagery of a living emperor depicted as divine was better received by the provinces, whose societies were accustomed to divine rulers.

The *Constitutio Antoniniana* naturalized millions of provincials who were predisposed to worship Caracalla as both emperor and divinity. Imrie's comments on Caracalla's Alexander *imitatio* can be applied to this matter. The emperor worship of Caracalla in the provinces is reminiscent of Alexander the Great's demand to be recognized as a god in 324 BCE.⁸⁵ Though the deification of Caracalla and his potential interest in Alexander the Great are not motives for the CA, they do help understand the edict in context of the repercussions. The Antonine Edict resulted in many new citizens who were reverent to the emperor. Like Alexander the Great, Caracalla intended to create a group of devoted supporters. Evidence for this can be found in the change of nomenclature throughout the Roman world, when many new citizens adopted the *nomen* Aurelius.⁸⁶ In Roman culture, assuming the Aurelius name held greater meaning than a name change. Those who took the emperor's name fundamentally became clients of the Caracalla, reminiscent of manumitted slaves. The mass naturalization of the empire likely led to many supporters of the emperor.

It is probable that the motivations behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana* were well thought out by Caracalla and his advisory council. Though the main two motivations of religion and financial gain are realistic options, examining these motivations within the Roman world of the early third century helps to develop our understanding. Singular motivations for such a radical law seem unlikely. Analyzing the Antonine Edict as a part of a political plan to support the new emperor's regime seems more convincing.

⁸⁵ Arnaldo Momigliano, "How Roman Emperors Became Gods," *The American Scholar* 55, no. 2 (1986): pp. 181-193, 185.

⁸⁶ Lavan, "The Spread of Roman Citizenship", 6.

Conclusion

This paper offers a collective way to study the motivations behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. Like Imrie, I think independently studying the motivations is not the most realistic way to analyze the Antonine Edict. Reviewing the edict as a part of a political agenda within the context it was written promotes a better understanding of the edict's intent. The *Constitutio Antoniniana*, as a source and a topic, remains elusive in the written record. Whether Caracalla wrote the edict as a true gift to the Roman world or as a politically motivated plot, an emperor of Syrian African decent born in the province of Gaul, who decreed a universal citizenship grant, is telling of the change in the third century.

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