

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Christian Influence on Roman Natural Law in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*

For Submission to the Helm's School of Government Conference *Promise of the Declaration: Building on the Legacy of, Life Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness*

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April 17, 2023

Introduction

No civilization has impacted contemporary western society more than the Romans. With a kaleidoscopic array of influences in society—from art to warfare, and everything in-between—the Roman civilization has certainly left its mark on the western world. One such mark, which remains exceedingly influential today, is the Roman jurisprudence and legal tradition. Roman legal tradition, as they saw it, brought justice and order to the world, something such tradition still does to this day thanks to the exceeding influence on contemporary jurisprudence—especially with the development of natural law.

Law had long been at the heart of Roman society which would lead to the creation of the Twelve Tables. This mix of statute and code, created around 450 BC, ensured a firm and written legal foundation for Roman Jurisprudence.¹ From the foundation of the Twelve Tables, Roman law, a living law, would continue to grow and develop throughout the centuries. Initially, Roman law was centered around *ius civile*, or law pertaining to Roman citizens. However, as the Romans expanded their borders and found their jurisdictions filled with more “non-Romans,” a more all-encompassing law was needed. This “Law of Nations,” that applied to all people, would become *ius gentium*. This law, while initially designed to cover pilgrims, would expand to cover all peoples within the Roman state.²

However, while *ius gentium* had long been an important kind of law in Roman legal thinking, in the third and fourth centuries, the scope of natural law had continued to increase as it no longer covered merely private law but now seeped into the spheres of public law. It no longer referred to mutual regulation of individuals but now saw itself become universal in marriages, property rights, inheritance, etc., by the time of Gaius, the renowned Jurist of the second century.³ Law began to be applied universally across the empire. In the early third century, the jurist, Ulpian, would summarize the purpose of the legal system as “the duty to not harm others and the duty to render each his due.”⁴ Ulpian would go on to describe justice as “an unswerving and perpetual determination to acknowledge *all men’s* rights [emphasis added].”⁵ Here, the universality coverage of law, or *ius gentium*, is displayed in the heart of these definitions of Roman jurisprudence—and to the larger extent, contemporary jurisprudence.

The trend towards increased universality of law would continue into arguably the most influential Roman legal documents ever compiled: Justinian’s *Corpus Juris Civilis*. The *Corpus Juris Civilis*, or the Code of Justinian, is a compilation of Roman legal writings which “simplified and rationalized fourteen centuries of Roman law,” written primarily because of the overcomplexity of existing legal code.⁶ Made up of three different works, the *Institutes*, the *Digest*, and the *Codex*, this massive undertaking was compiled by a commission of ten men, led by the jurist Tribonian. To grasp the scope, the *Digest* for instance, consolidated 2,000 books, totaling 3 million lines of text, into 150,000 lines; approximately one and a half times the size of the Bible.⁷

¹ Barry Nicholas, *An Introduction to Roman Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 16.

² Stanislaw Wielgus, “The Genesis and History of ‘Ius Gentium’ in the Ancient World and the Middle Ages,” *Roczniki Filozoficzne / Annales de Philosophie / Annals of Philosophy* 47, no. 2 (1999): 337.

³ Wielgus, “The Genesis and History of ‘Ius Gentium’ in the Ancient World and the Middle Ages, 337.

⁴ Ernest Metzger, *A Companion to Justinian’s Institutes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Craig A. Stern, “Justinian: Lieutenant of Christ, Legislator for Christendom,” *Regent University Law Review*, 11, no. 1 (1998): 161.

⁷ Barry, *An Introduction to Roman Law*, 40.

However, while this work was largely a compilation of former written legal documents, it also introduced a large degree of never-before-seen code; much of it often altering law that had changed little throughout the centuries and were at the heart of traditional Roman law. Notable about the changes in Roman law was the increased scope and change in view of *ius gentium*. In one of Justinian's definitions for *ius gentium*, he describes it as "observed uniformity by *all peoples* [emphasis added]".⁸ While similar to Ulpian's quote, there is a subtle difference between "recognizing all men's rights" and "uniformity by all peoples." A difference of which the former leaves open the ability of man having different degrees of rights while the latter, Justinian's quote, seems to place all people's rights on equal terms. A difference of *ius gentium* being applied *consistently* to each class of person across the empire, to being ruled *equally* throughout the empire.

Such a potential radical shift in the perception of *ius gentium* corresponds with arguably the most significant development in the Western World: the growth and rise of Christianity. Since the beginning of the Apostle Paul's first missionary journey in AD 45, the Christian faith had steadily continued to grow, even amidst stretches of intense persecution. Such expansion of the faith would coalesce with the first Christian Emperor of Constantine in AD 324 and Emperor Theodosius establishing Christianity as the official state religion in AD 380. This religion, built around the monotheistic Jewish faith, was quite different than traditional Roman beliefs and brought a significant degree of change to the ancient empire.

Another quote by Justinian on *ius gentium* seems to imply Christian influence on Roman concepts of natural law was no different, saying, "natural law is sanctioned by divine providence, it must necessarily be unchangeable. Humans cannot alter what God has established for their benefit."⁹ Furthermore, quotes throughout the *Corpus Juris Civilis* continue to display the Christian influence, as seen with the *Institutes* beginning with, "In the name of Our Lord, Jesus Christ,"¹⁰ and with the *Digest* saying, "Governing under the authority of God our empire was delivered to use by the Heavenly Majesty."¹¹ These quotes, and many like them, make it apparent that the Empire was now an amalgamation of Christian and Roman identity. However, the question is whether Christian influence was titular Roman vernacular or if it had real impact on Roman law, and more specifically, on *ius gentium*.

Thus, the research question this paper seeks to answer is to what extent did Christian beliefs impact Roman natural law, *ius gentium*, as evidenced in Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis*. The hypothesis going into this paper was that while there would be a degree of similarities between Roman and Christian natural law from the foundation of both traditions—seen in the 12 Tables and the Bible—there would be positive correlation between the growth of Christian influence within the empire and alteration of *ius gentium* to change from merely being *consistent* across the empire, to becoming more *equal* for all; therefore, the development of universal human rights would be seen to develop.

Literature Review

To effectively answer the question presented in this research necessitates the study of the surrounding literature. With the study of the surrounding literature, two main goals are pursued: Firstly, to analyze both the traditional Roman and Christian view of natural law so they can be

⁸ Metzger, *A Companion to Justinian's Institutes*, 4.

⁹ Metzger, *A Companion to Justinian's Institutes*, 4.

¹⁰ John Baron Moyle, trans, *The Institutes of Justinian* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), book 1, title 1.

¹¹ Alan Watson, ed, *The Digest of Justinian, Volume 1-4* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), Volume 1, book 1.

contrasted; and secondly, to evaluate contemporary historians' interpretations on the synchronism of Roman and Christian views in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.

Among the first proponents for natural law within the concordance of the Greco-Roman tradition was actually not a Roman, but a Greek: Aristotle. In the Greek world, everyone more-or-less fell into either being "civilized" (a Greek) or being a "barbarian" (a non-Greek). The "civilized" Greeks had "natural rights" while foreigners—barbarians—had no such rights and were on par with animals.¹² Aristotle, however, would be the first to introduce a set of law to apply to not just members of the society, but men outside of it, saying, "it is the right that obtains among men who share a common life in order that their association bring them self-sufficiency and who are free and equal."¹³ Such thought of equality of men would later come to influence Epicurus and Stoic thinking.

Stemming from the influence in Stoic thinking, Cicero would be the next thinker to carry the torch of natural law. Cicero, in his *On the Republic*, saw law as "right reason in agreement with nature," and that "there will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be candid for all nations and at all times..."¹⁴ Here, much like Aristotle, Cicero asserts laws being universal because it stems from *nature*. Furthermore, just as Aristotle based his natural law on those "who share a common life," Cicero saw law as applicable across all groups, but not necessary for all people. Living in a highly stratified society, Cicero believed in the concept of *concordia*, or harmony among the classes.¹⁵ He believed in a society that, with different degrees of value for groups, would work in harmony following natural laws that would transcend borders by being the same everywhere—while not necessarily the same for *everyone*.

Thus, western natural law thinkers believed in a hierarchical, natural, universal law applicable to all nations. Historian Aude Chatelard writes that in Rome, "inequalities between citizens were justified by the principle of geometrical equality, whereby everyone has rights and responsibilities in proportion to their means, qualities and merit."¹⁶ The basis for this legal inequality, as the *Regent Law Review* points out, was "hinged upon whether one was a Roman citizen, or one holding Latin Rights, or the status of a freedman, or some other level of civil rank."¹⁷ In the Greco-Roman mind, *ius gentium*, or natural law, are laws which apply naturally to all nations' social hierarchies, but not equally to all those within the hierarchies. Thus, law is universally consistent but not equal.

Contrariwise, Judeo-Christian thinkers looked at the concept of natural law in a completely different paradigm. Thomas Aquinas, while living well past the writing of the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, best systematized Christian beliefs in natural law. Unlike Greco-Roman thinkers, who viewed varying degrees of worth in individuals, Aquinas saw all men as equal under the law, saying, "the light of reason is placed by nature [and thus by God] in every man to guide him in his acts."¹⁸ In his writing about natural law, Aquinas' focus is that the purpose of such law is for the "common good," similar to Cicero's common good for the republic which necessitated *concordia*. However,

¹² Wielgus, "The Genesis and History of 'Ius Gentium' in the Ancient World and Middle Ages," 336.

¹³ D.P. Chase, Trans., *The Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (The Gutenberg Project, 2003).

¹⁴ George William Featherstonhaugh, trans, *The Republic of Cicero* (Project Gutenberg, 2017).

¹⁵ Eric Patterson and Timothy J. Demy, *Philosophers on War* (Newport, RI: Stone Tower Books, 2017),

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¹⁶ Aude Chatelard and Anne Stevens, "Women as Legal Minors and Their Citizenship in Republican Rome," *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, no. 43 (2016): 27.

¹⁷ Stern, "Justinian," 35.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (The Gutenberg Project, 2021), ST II. I. 94.

unlike Cicero, Aquinas' common good included the *individual*. Among his *opum bonum*'s is charity; helping and loving individuals—not just acting for the sake of society. Thus, the Christian *ius gentium* was not only consistent across borders, but propitiated equality among all people.

With the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian perception of natural law studied by reviewing the literature that describes their beliefs, it is now necessary to identify what the contemporary historiography has to say about the influence Christianity had on Roman *ius gentium* in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. Consistent across the historiography on the subject is that Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis* was indeed influenced by Christian thinking. The current conversation rests on arguments over degree. Some historians, like A.M. Honoré, argues that this code was influenced significantly from Christian writings.¹⁹ Historian Michael Maas would agree, as he wrote that throughout, “a controlling Christian theory is paramount and demonstrable.”²⁰

Other writers, however, see a more balanced approach to the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. Craig A. Stern argues that this code was not a “wholesale adoption of the laws of the Bible,” but rather a compilation of Roman law with an eye for Biblical principles.²¹ Furthermore, Nicholas Barry argues similarly, pointing out there are clear interpretations stemming from the Twelve Tables in its sections on criminal matters.²² This balanced syncretism was further supported by H.F. Jolowicz, who argues such works characterize a “blend of classical Roman legal principles with Greek and Christian thought.”²³

However, for Jolowicz, this blend facilitated detrimental ramifications as he describes Roman law at this point as “withering.”²⁴ Other legal historians would agree. David Nasmith calls Roman law at this point as “decaying.”²⁵ He argues, “To confound, however, the province of the Church with that of the Law—the Secular power—is fatal alike to the Law and to the Church. The experience of the Romans sufficiently demonstrates that.”²⁶ Together, Jolowicz and Nasmith see the inclusion of Christian tradition into Roman law as a working poison.

Other historians would see to the contrary. Craig Stern argues that Justinian's focus on “the interest of greater humanity” was most profound and that his work was to be the “epitome of human justice” for all persons in the empire. He goes on to say that Justinian's “rooting of universal law in God's providence as an outworking of reason rather than raw imperial will endeared Justinian's work to later legal minds.”²⁷ This side of the argument sees the infusion of universal human rights into *ius gentium* as a major step forward which would sow the seed equality under the law. This in turn would coalesce into contemporary universal human rights.

Methods

To discern the influence of Christian egalitarian principles in natural law on Roman code, qualitative strategies are to be implemented. More specifically, the use of primary document

¹⁹ A.M. Honoré, “Some Constitutions Composed by Justinian.” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 65 (1975): 123.

²⁰ Michael Maas, “Roman History and Christian Ideology in Justinianic Reform Legislation,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 40 (1986): 18.

²¹ Stern, “Justinian,” 161.

²² Nicholas, *An Introduction to Roman Law*, 236.

²³ Glendon, *The Forum and the Tower*, 54.

²⁴ Glendon, *The Forum and the Tower*, 54.

²⁵ David Nasmith, *Outline of Roman History from Romulus to Justinian (including Translation of the Twelve Tables, the Institutes of Gaius, and the Institutes of Justinian)*, with Special Reference to the Growth, Development and Decay of Roman Jurisprudence (Clark, N.J: Lawbook Exchange, 2006), ix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Stern, “Justinian,” 164.

analysis on Justinian's *Corpus Juris Civilis*, with focus on his *Institutes* and *Digest*, will be analyzed. These documents, being analyzed with the help supporting documents, like Ernest Metzger's *A Companion to Justinian's Institutes*, were compared to both fundamental Roman and Christian writings—such as the Bible and the Twelve Tables—to discern if, with the onset and growth of Christianity, Roman legal principles of *ius gentium* has shifted toward the more egalitarian Christian perception.

Findings

The qualitative primary document analysis of the *Corpus Juris Civilis* revealed significant alteration from the classical Roman perception *ius gentium* to align more closely with the Christian view of natural law throughout. Such expansion of the term from simply expressing universal consistency towards expressing natural human equality is seen—a growth in the concept of human rights. While not completely egalitarian, with inequalities still being present across the Roman “orders,” the increase in Christian influence over the empire has a positive correlation to the increase in the Christian, more egalitarian, concept of natural law and thus lending to human rights. This influence stems directly from Christian teaching that all men are in the *imago Dei*,²⁸ the image of God, and that there is no distinction between “Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.”²⁹ The development of human rights being facilitated through the Christian influence on the *Corpus Juris Civilis* is found in the code's increase of rights to slaves, women, and children—stemming largely from the decrease power of the *paterfamilias*.

One of the most dramatic changes facilitated in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which has its roots from Christian influence of natural law, is regarding slaves. In the classical Roman view, as held by Cicero, slaves were not equated the rights of free men. Gaius argued that while man was naturally free (*ius naturale*), while contrary, through the universal law of nations (*ius gentium*), one could be subject to enslavement and valued lesser.³⁰ While Justinian would not abandon this leading apologetic of slavery within the empire, he would eliminate all the other distinctions of individuals under the law.³¹ His elimination of other distinctions and the increase in the rights of slaves displays the subtle influence of Christian opinions on slaves and the more egalitarian Christian natural law had on him and his perception of *ius gentium*.

One notable alteration in the code that reveals such Christian influence is his repeal of the Aelian-Sentian Act of AD 4 and the Fufian-Caninian Act of 2 BC. Combined, these acts restricted emancipation of slaves, with the former restricting them based on the age of both the slave and the master, and the latter restricting emancipation by the proportion of slaves one could manumit.³² The repeals of this legislation that had been on the books for half a millennium made it significantly easier for slaves to be freed and admitted into standard society. Furthermore, more incentives to manumit slaves were established, such as in the case where a slave of a pagan master converted to Christianity as they would then be legally obligated to be manumitted.³³ While stemming from a law in which Christians could not be owned by non-Christians, which could be argued to be unequal, an understanding of the historical context and how engrained slavery was in the Roman world reveals this being the only socially acceptable step available at the time in its slow road to

²⁸ Gen. 1:27 (Eastern Standard Version).

²⁹ Gal. 3:28 (Eastern Standard Version).

³⁰ Metzger, *A Companion to Justinian's Institutes*, 18.

³¹ Stern, “Justinian,” 35.

³² John Baron Moyle, trans., *The Institutes of Justinian* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), book 1, title vii.

³³ Catherine Brewer, “The Status of the Jews in Roman Legislation: The Regn of Justinian 527-565 CE,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 38, no. 2 (2005): 129.

uproot slavery. This Christian influence on the rights of slaves and manumission in the *Corpus Juris Civilis* is direct, coming from the teaching that there is neither “slave nor free,” but all are one in Christ. This thus reflects the positive correlation of Christian influence promoting a more egalitarian perception of *ius gentium* in Roman law.

Another notable alteration in Roman law facilitated by the influx of Christian influence involves the rights of another oppressed group: women. Women in Rome had traditionally received little rights, stemming largely from the concept of *infirmitas sexus*, the weakness of the female nature.³⁴ While freedom of women did slowly expand throughout the empire, large strides were established in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. One of the most significant developments in women’s rights that Justinian facilitated was his restriction of divorce. Marriage before this time was viewed as an avenue for the augmentation of paternal power in which the man had unfettered ability to divorce.³⁵ Influenced by Christian disdain for divorce, Justinian drastically reduced the ability to divorce and for a time, banned it outright.³⁶ No longer could women be left for any reason, and they now had long desired security in marriage.

Furthermore, continuing the trend of Christian equality in *ius gentium*, is the increase in other rights involving women, including property ownership and guardianship. Traditionally, when married, all the woman’s property became the husbands, as expressed in the Twelve Tables.³⁷ Nevertheless, by the time of Justinian, this had been replaced by “free marriages” in which the woman still retained her rights to her property.³⁸ Furthermore, women’s rights to guardianship was expanded. Traditionally, according to the Twelve Tables, guardianship had to come from the father’s side of the family.³⁹ Justinian, however, removed such barriers involving women being guardians for children. Thus, if the father died, the widow could now retain possession of their child.⁴⁰ In accordance with these developments in women’s rights, he also began to remove women from discrimination in receiving inheritances.⁴¹ Thus, influenced by Christian beliefs that radically proposed women were made in the *imago Dei* as much as men, a development in a Christian perception of *ius gentium* is seen in Justinian’s *Corpus Juris Civilis* with the increase in both women’s marital and property rights within the empire.

The third major change within Roman law in the *Corpus Juris Civilis* reflecting the rise of Christian influence in *ius gentium* is regarding paternal rights over their children. Traditionally in Rome, the *paterfamilias*, the head of the household, had complete authority over his household. This authority meant a father who had an unwanted child had the right to, and was fairly common practice, to leave the child out to die of exposure or to sell their child directly into slavery. While Christian emperors before Justinian had already eliminated the legality of exposure and had severely limited the ability to sell the child, Justinian continued to uphold these positions.⁴² These laws protected the vulnerable and reflected the Christian view of *ius gentium* including all people, regardless of status.

Furthermore, children were further protected through an expansion of their rights as, under Justinian, children could now retain their own property and illegitimate children could now

³⁴ Chatelard, “Women as Legal Minors and Their Citizenship in Republican Rome,” 30.

³⁵ Metzger, *A Companion to Justinian’s Institutes*, 23.

³⁶ Nicholas, *An Introduction to Roman Law*, 87.

³⁷ Metzger, *A Companion to Justinian’s Institutes*, 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Metzger, *A Companion to Justinian’s Institutes*, 34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 24.

become legitimized.⁴³ Both these rights were previously not allowed under Roman law. The decrease in paternal power to the benefit of children reflects Christian influence of, regardless of status, them being in the *imago Dei* and “little children” belonging to the “kingdom of heaven.”⁴⁴ Thus, an increase in rights to the vulnerable in Roman society—slaves, woman, and children—continue to reflect the positive correlation between the influence of Christianity within the empire and the saturation of Christian concepts of human rights in *ius gentium* within the Roman legal code.

Conclusion

With the analysis of Justinian’s *Corpus Juris Civilis*, it is apparent that there is a strong positive correlation between the growth of Christianity in the empire and the diffusion of Christian beliefs on natural law into Roman *ius gentium*. While *ius gentium* was a long established Roman legal principle, this “natural law” was universal in the sense of it being *consistent* across nations rather than *equal* between people. While Ulpian quoted justice as “the duty to not harm others and the duty to render each his due,” the real discrepancy between Roman and Christian *ius gentium* is the question of what each person *is* due. While Romans traditionally attributed value based in proportion to their merit and responsibility, Christians based value in a radically egalitarian way, viewing all people in the *imago Dei* and thus removing class from value. Thus, as Christianity grew in the empire, so did the influence of more egalitarian Christian natural law infiltrate Roman *ius gentium* and pave the way for universal human rights.

⁴³ John Baron Moyle, trans. *The Institutes of Justinian* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), J.1.10.13.

⁴⁴ Matt. 19:14 (Eastern Standard Version).

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