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0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

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[More information](#)

## I

## INTRODUCTION

When Titus Quinctius Flaminius returned to Rome in 194 BCE from his campaigns in Greece, he treated the city to a magnificent show. The senate granted him permission to celebrate a triumph for several victories, most notably for the one over Philip V of Macedon, who had supported Hannibal during the Second Punic War and who had struck a little too close to home when he tried to conquer the Greek coast across from the Italian peninsula.<sup>1</sup> As Livy tells it, the festivities lasted for three days, with a parade of the usual riches and spectacles of a Roman triumph, but here at hyperbolic levels.<sup>2</sup> Works of art, weapons caches, and wagons loaded with ingots of precious metals and mounds of coins were carted through the streets. Brightly colored placards and tableaux would have depicted events in the war, as well as conquered territories, city walls breached by the Romans, and unfamiliar fields, rivers, and mountains. A horde of prisoners of war would have choked the streets, hundreds of them destined for slavery.<sup>3</sup> Such an array of conquest must have been deeply impressive

<sup>1</sup> The principal victory had come in 197 BCE, but Flaminius did not return to Rome until after evacuating Greece three years later. On the activities of Philip in Illyria during the Second Punic War, see Dorey and Dudley 1971, 120–121 and Gruen 1984, 373–379. For the origins of the so-called Second Macedonian War, characterized by caution and a reliance on Greek allies on the part of the Romans, see Gruen 1984, 437–447. For Flaminius's role in driving the campaign and the negotiations, see Eckstein 1987a, 269–277.

<sup>2</sup> Livy, 34.52. Phillips 1974 discusses the formulaic nature – and artistry – of Livy's references to triumphs.

<sup>3</sup> For the history and common characteristics of Roman triumphs, see Versnel 1970; Warren 1970; Künzl 1988. For the theatricality of the triumph, see Beard 2003.

Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOSTAGES AND HOSTAGE-TAKING IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

to the audience: most of the people in the crowd would have never been to Greece, much less ever traveled beyond Italy, and the images of a distant place and the troves of its artifacts represented their first, or only, experience of an Hellenic landscape and culture. They would have been aware of few details of the campaign itself and would have reveled in the knowledge, here newly created, of a mysterious enemy now thoroughly reduced.<sup>4</sup> Confidence in Rome's opportunities must have been pervasive: the crops of another world would grow for the first time at the behest of the Romans, and prisoners of war would soon be enslaved and their activities thus diverted from the defense of Greece to labor for Roman masters.<sup>5</sup> In the Roman world, triumphal processions were fundamentally optimistic; the display of conquest was as much about imminent glory as it was about the general's past success.<sup>6</sup>

The climax came on the third day when dozens of Greek boys trudged along in front of Flamininus, who, as the *triumphator*, would have appeared as a near-god, decked in purple and with his face painted red as he rode in a four-horse chariot up to join Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill. The Greek youths before him were about twenty-five in number; Polybius calls them ὄμηροι and Livy calls them *obsides*.<sup>7</sup> The conventional English translation for both terms is "hostage," as the

<sup>4</sup> On the informative aspects of the triumph's display, see Mattern 1999, 162–168. On paintings in triumphal processions and their didactic quality, see Holliday 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Flamininus had just evacuated Roman troops from Greece and proclaimed Greek freedom from oversight, and so no formal tribute could have been expected at the time. Nevertheless, the image of conquest and control was unmistakable. In Livy, 34.50.4 the Romans expected *officium*, or duty-bound reciprocity from Greece. According to Livy, 34.51.6, Flamininus had hand-picked the new government there, on which Cf. Eckstein 1987a, 294–295.

<sup>6</sup> Versnel 1970, 371, compares the *triumphator's* function as the bearer of good fortune with festivals in ancient Greek, Israelite, and Norse cultures. Compare Polybius, 6.54.3, who discusses the Roman funeral procession in terms of its forward-looking, inspirational effect on the audience.

<sup>7</sup> Five were from Sparta and the rest from Macedon. Sparta: Livy, 34.35.11, 34.40.4. Macedon: Polyb. 18.39.5; Livy, 33.13.14, 33.30.10; App. *Mac.* 2; Plut. *Flam.* 9.5; Cass. Dio, 18.60. Our sources do not mention a number for the Macedonian hostages. It would be reasonable, and conservative, to estimate about twenty, given the greater size of Macedon relative to Sparta and the fact that forty hostages were taken from the Aetolian League in 189, and twenty were taken from Philip's principal, and comparable, Hellenistic rival Antiochus III in 188 (see later).

Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

boys had been taken from their families in Greece in part to serve as assurances for the postwar settlement. One of them was Demetrius, the son of Philip V; another was Armenes, the son of the tyrant Nabis of Sparta. Demetrius had been about ten years old when his internment began in 197, so he was about thirteen when he took part in the triumph in 194; we do not know the names of the others but they would have been of similar age and aristocratic pedigree.<sup>8</sup>

Viewed together, they formed a memorable entourage: as children of the nobility, all of them would have been well dressed; as adolescents, many of them would have been gangly and uncomfortable, both in Rome and in their own skins. Speaking to each other in Greek (if they spoke at all), failing to understand the Latin cries all around them, making their way before Flamininus's chariot, which bore down on them from behind, and perhaps stumbling in the awkwardness of their early teenage years, the hostages must have seemed utterly pathetic and powerless. That appears to have been the point: here at the very zenith of the triumph, the man responsible for it all came shepherding a final and peculiar asset for Rome's future, a next generation. Demetrius had been a young, healthy prince with a famous father and a potentially glorious career ahead of him as an heir to a faraway kingdom – that of Alexander the Great, no less – until Rome intervened; now he was firmly, and spectacularly, under Roman control. His position at the front of the *triumphator's* chariot was a meaningful place for him to march; he and his peers were occupying a space that was typically

<sup>8</sup> According to Livy, 40.6.4, Demetrius was born around 207 BCE. Polyb. 18.39.5 and Livy, 33.13.14 say that he served as a hostage for a four-month truce in 197 while terms were negotiated and ratified in Rome. In Livy, 33.30.10, Demetrius is included as a hostage for the final settlement of 196. It is uncertain whether Demetrius stayed with Flamininus on campaign in Greece until 194 or if he had been sent to Rome immediately after Cynoscephalae. Plut. *Flam.* 9.5 weakly implies the latter, but Walker 1980, 97–99 notes examples where Roman generals are said to hold on to their hostages until the triumph. For the timing of events from the victory to the settlement, see Baronowski 1983. No source explicitly states the ages of the other Macedonian hostages, nor of Armenes and the other Spartans. Polyb. 18.39.5 and Livy, 33.13.14 say that the Macedonian hostages were taken from among Philip's "Friends" (τινας ἑτέρους τῶν φίλων, *ex amicorum numero obsides*). Walker 1980, 50 suggests this may refer to the children of these powerful associates of the king, although it is possible that the "Friends" themselves, obviously adults, were in the entourage. Once again, comparable episodes from this period would suggest that the very young were the principal targets of Roman policy (see later).

Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOSTAGES AND HOSTAGE-TAKING IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

reserved for the most valuable catch of the campaign.<sup>9</sup> Unlike their compatriot prisoners of war who plodded through the streets *en masse*, these boys held positions of respect, on par with the conqueror's own social milieu. The presence of the hostages – the first in Rome from the Greek mainland – alongside the leaders of the city demonstrated that the Romans had entered onto an international stage. Through possession of Demetrius, Armenes, and the rest, Flamininus and the Roman celebrants who watched them implicitly staked a claim to that cultured land that had, to the Roman mind, produced giants of history and human intellect, as well as made fundamental contributions to their beliefs and legends. The scene was a dramatic verification of the success of the campaign. This crowd of boys, when so starkly shown in captivity and respectful submission, would have enlivened an already raucous pageant of civic pride, nationalistic superiority, and hopes for the future.

In the Rome of the early second century BCE, there appears to have been a fascination for the experiences of the foreign traveler in a land not his own. Watching from the windows and rooftops of a packed city, the spectators would have been exhilarated by the sight of the hostages, but they would not have been surprised. Such detainees had been part of prior triumphal processions, and only recently a much larger band of them, brought to Italy from Carthage, had conspicuously taken up residence in and around the city.<sup>10</sup> The Carthaginians had agreed less than a decade earlier, under the terms of an armistice in 203 BCE and again under the compulsion of their defeat at Zama in 202, to submit hundreds of hostages.<sup>11</sup> All of them were intended to fit a profile that was specified by the Romans in a formal treaty: they were to be between fourteen and thirty years of age; they were to be of noble

<sup>9</sup> Versnel 1970, 95; Phillips 1974, 271. Compare Edwards 2003, 62–64, who sees the inclusion of images of the enemy in the triumph as potentially honorific for the defeated. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> Other than the Carthaginian example outlined below, note also the hostages taken from the Samnites (Livy, 9.16.1; 9.20.4; 10.11.13) and the Boii (Polyb. 3.40.7; Livy, 21.25.7; Frontin. *Str.* 1.8.6), and, perhaps mythically, from the Etruscans (Livy, 5.27; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 9.17.3; Frontin. *Str.* 4.4.1) and the Volsci (Livy 2.16.9; 2.22.2; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 6.25.2; 6.30.1).

<sup>11</sup> For a complete discussion of the evidence for the Punic hostages, collected at Moscovich 1974a, see Chapter 2.

## INTRODUCTION

families; and a group of them was to be present in Rome, apparently, as long as the war indemnity payments were required, or a period of fifty years.<sup>12</sup> Every now and then, at the discretion of the senate, hostages who had grown up in Italy could be sent back to Carthage and swapped for a new batch of young aristocrats.<sup>13</sup> Again, speaking in an unfamiliar language and wearing their distinctive Punic clothing, and most important, under the close supervision of the senate, these hostages must have drawn the gossipy attention of the Roman public, as well as of the ruling elite. Residents abroad embodied the honor and identity of their native origins; their differences made them exotic and larger than life. Any visitor, be he a hostage or not, was charged with symbolism; an insult directed toward him could carry a broader message of disrespect to all of his countrymen and would be assumed to reflect the general attitude of the host. Likewise, if he were honored and treated favorably, he could serve as a living token of peace and accord. Both sides, Roman and non-Roman, weighed the traveler's reactions to his peculiar surroundings, whether they be of assimilation or resistance, in forming their general opinions about each other. The way the host treated the hostage and the way the hostage responded to either hostility or embrace affected entire populations in multiple areas of life.

The subsequent career and behavior of Demetrius of Macedon serves as an extended case in point. After six years as a hostage, he was released in 191 as a gesture of gratitude by the senate for Philip's assistance in a war against the Seleucid king, Antiochus III.<sup>14</sup> Of course, a child's years from ages ten to sixteen are witness to acute physical, social, and psychological transformations in any context, whether at home or abroad, and not surprisingly our sources suggest that Demetrius returned to Pella a changed man. Having spent

<sup>12</sup> In addition to later in Chapter 2, see Polyb. 15.18.7–8; Nepos, *Hann.* 7.2; Livy, 30.37.6; App. *Hann.* 54, 79; Cass. Dio, 17.82. No source explicitly links the hostages to the indemnity; on the problematic relationship between hostages and indemnity payments, see Chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> Livy, 40.34.14 suggests a rotation for 181 BCE, and Livy 45.14.5 suggests the same for 168 BCE. The practice has been called *mutatio obsidum*, on which see note 46.

<sup>14</sup> Polyb. 21.3.3, 21.11.9; Diod. Sic. 28.15; Livy, 35.31.5, 36.35.13, 37.25.12; Plut. *Flam.* 14; App. *Mac.* 5, *Syr.* 20.

Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOSTAGES AND HOSTAGE-TAKING IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

his formative years under the tutelage of Flamininus and other senators, Demetrius appeared to have developed a capacity for communicating well with the Romans. When, in 184 BCE, several of Macedon's neighbors gathered before the senate to accuse Philip of plotting to extend his territory against Roman wishes, Philip chose Demetrius to deliver the response in Rome. At the age of twenty-four, then, he made the trip back across the Adriatic and reentered the familiar buildings of his youth.<sup>15</sup> Memories of his first arrival, when he was a boy, as part of a rambunctious and noisy triumph could not have escaped him.

Our sources suggest that Demetrius's transformation continued to have larger political ramifications. The senators, along with Flamininus, gave their former ward a warm reception, the complaints of Philip's neighbors were dismissed, and Demetrius's mission was presumably a success.<sup>16</sup> But, according to Polybius, word got out among the Macedonians, helped by Roman sources, that the grant of indulgence by the senate was a favor to Demetrius specifically, and not to his father. Livy adds that the senate claimed still to hold Demetrius's soul hostage even though they had returned his body.<sup>17</sup> Our historians thus imply that the Roman embrace of Demetrius had behind it an insidious purpose and that Flamininus was deliberately reestablishing the relationship that he had formed during Demetrius's hostageship in order to win him over and thus to interfere with Macedonian politics.<sup>18</sup> The tactic is said to have had its intended effect on the Macedonian people at large: not wanting war with Rome, they allegedly pinned their hopes on Demetrius as the leader who would avoid it, and he became the center of a political movement against Philip V.<sup>19</sup> As Polybius and Livy construe it, just one former hostage, who gave the impression of an affinity for Rome based on his childhood acquaintance with

<sup>15</sup> Polyb. 22.14.10; Livy, 39.35.3.

<sup>16</sup> Polyb. 23.2.9–11; 23.3.6; 23.7.1.

<sup>17</sup> Livy, 39.47.10: *obsidum enim se animum eius habere, etsi corpus patri reddiderit.*

<sup>18</sup> Polyb. 23.3.7–8; Livy, 39.47.10. Cf. Edson 1935, 193 and Aymard 1961, 141. Gruen 1984, 221 sees the action as only Flamininus's undertaking and not a part of Roman policy. For our purposes, the perception of Demetrius's malleability, as described by our sources, takes precedence over the reality, whatever it was.

<sup>19</sup> Polyb. 23.7.2–3; Livy, 39.53.1–10; 40.5.2.

Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Roman senators and Roman life, had enhanced the Roman-friendly environment under a diplomatically unfriendly regime. By singling out a symbolic foreign resident in their midst, Roman senators had polarized a community at their periphery and had exacerbated already existing ideological rifts therein.

At this point, Polybius's narrative becomes fragmentary and we are left with Livy to recount the famous story of the suspicions of Demetrius's older brother Perseus.<sup>20</sup> Perseus believed that Demetrius had begun to plot with Flamininus for the overthrow of Philip with the plan of taking Perseus's place in the succession and installing himself on the throne as a vassal of Rome. For Livy's Perseus, a mountain of circumstantial evidence began to pile up: Demetrius appeared to spend an inordinate amount of time with Roman ambassadors in Pella, and he defended Rome and the Roman way of life in conversations with his family.<sup>21</sup> At no time is Demetrius said to have acted on any royal ambitions, but his brother's and father's perception of his demeanor condemned him nonetheless. First Perseus, and later Philip as well, planted spies to verify, or in some cases to fabricate, evidence of Demetrius's betrayal.<sup>22</sup> Eventually two of Philip's ambassadors produced a letter from Flamininus to Philip stating that Flamininus doubted that Demetrius would plot against the royal family, but that if he did, Flamininus would not have any part in it.<sup>23</sup> Although there was no accusation in the letter, Flamininus's tone still left open the possibility that Demetrius was a traitor, and this was enough for Philip to order one of his men to kill his son. Livy says that the letter was revealed to be a forgery, but by then the damage had already been done.<sup>24</sup> Demetrius's bizarre, lifetime journey, split between Macedon and Rome – and all the rumors, paranoia, espionage, deceit, and betrayal

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Polyb. 23.10.13–16; 23.11. For the literary quality of the story of family dysfunction and Demetrius's demise, see Walbank 1938.

<sup>21</sup> Livy, 39.53.11; 40.5.7–8.

<sup>22</sup> Livy, 40.7.4; 40.20.3–4; 40.21.10–11; 40.23.1–2.

<sup>23</sup> Livy, 40.23.7–8.

<sup>24</sup> For the forgery, see Diod. Sic. 29.25; Livy, 40.55. For Philip's call for Demetrius's execution, see Polyb. 23.3.9; Diod. Sic. 29.25; Livy, 40.24, 41.23.11; Plut. *Arat.* 54.3. On the authenticity of the letter, forgery or not, see Walbank 1940, 250–251.

Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOSTAGES AND HOSTAGE-TAKING IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

that such travels are said to have elicited in Perseus and Philip – came to an end when Demetrius was poisoned and smothered in 181 at the age of twenty-six.

From his early childhood, Demetrius seems to have been swept up in a maelstrom. At the root of both his failures and what little success he achieved, according to our sources, was his status as a hostage and his unique trait of having spent extended periods of time in two competing realms. According to Polybius and Livy, Demetrius himself was unable to do much on his own. When he was part of the embassy pleading on behalf of Philip against his Greek neighbors, he is said to have bungled his presentation to the point that senators intervened out of sympathy and granted his requests regardless.<sup>25</sup> Demetrius does not seem to have been savvy in politics, but rather he is depicted as a pawn in events that taxed his capabilities and as a symbol of relations between two great powers. As a hostage, he was at the center of high level negotiations in international diplomacy, and as a hostage, he was privy to both the Roman and the Macedonian ways of life. His connections in Macedon made him appealing to Flamininus; his connections in Rome made him appealing to Philip. His Greekness made him suitable for display before the greedy eyes at the triumphal procession; his Roman-ness made him a magnet for a faction of pro-Romanists in Macedon. His Roman qualities also drew the fatal envy of his brother.

All of these various fears and hopes reflect certain exigencies in the international relations of Roman antiquity. By holding Demetrius at a young age and by exercising their influence over him, the Romans believed they had an undeniable opportunity in geopolitics. In societies where legitimacy to rule was passed through blood, an opposing faction, outside of power, could make significant inroads with merely a warm body with a good name, if he (or, more rarely, she) was shown to represent their cause. Diplomacy naturally did not entail simply a bilateral relationship between two states; under a more complex rubric, it involved the various factions in internal struggles on either side. Monarchies, by virtue of their centralized authority, could be subject to manipulation through dynastic alternatives. Even in the cases of nondynastic regimes, like the more democratic or

<sup>25</sup> Polyb. 23.2.2–9; Livy, 39.47.1–9.



Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

oligarchic leagues of Greece, hostages and other types of travelers in Rome could wrinkle the cloth of diplomacy, either by actively pursuing their own ambitions or in being used by others. Young men, potentially impressionable, potentially ambitious, whose stay in Rome was finite and who were within reach of major political responsibility could have a heavy influence on political opinion down the road. As a hostage Demetrius was seized on as a valuable commodity more than once; tugged back and forth, he never had control over his future.

It would be fair to say that Roman writers – historians and otherwise – were obsessed with hostages. Many stories from Greco-Roman antiquity are strikingly similar to that of Demetrius, and hostages recur frequently as contentious figures at the center of momentous events. According to one source, a mythical hostage was a foremother of the Roman race: Dionysius of Halicarnassus says that one version for the parentage of Latinus, the king whose daughter married Aeneas, claimed that he was the son of Heracles and a hostage girl from the north, with whom Heracles was traveling.<sup>26</sup> Roman legends are packed with courage-in-the-face-of-adversity moments, embellished over centuries, which feature bold heroes who ignore their shackles. Cloelia famously swam the Tiber to escape her obligation as a hostage to the invading king Lars Porsenna in the early days of the Republic, only to be returned by the Romans who upheld their diplomatic vow; as a prisoner of war Mucius Scaevola willfully thrust his right hand into the fire before the same Etruscan king, showing that he would suffer any amount of torture before assisting his enemy.<sup>27</sup> As we shall see, such tales, bandied about by Augustan age authors, may have had more to do with events contemporary with the time of composition than with the international negotiations of the early Republic. Nevertheless, numerous references to hostages in the early skirmishes with Rome's neighboring tribes – the Etruscans, the Volsci, the Samnites – suggest that hostage-taking was seen as widespread at an early stage

<sup>26</sup> Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.43.1.

<sup>27</sup> Cloelia: Livy, 2.13, 2.15.6; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.33; Verg. *Aen.* 8.651; Val. Max. 3.2.2; *De vir. ill.* 13; Juv. 9.264–265; Plut. *Mor.* 250D, *Publicola* 19.2; Cass. Dio, 45.31.1. Scaevola (as a hostage rather than a prisoner of war): Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.31.2. See also later, Chapters 3 and 7.

Cambridge University Press

0521861837 - Hostages and Hostage-Taking in the Roman Empire

Joel Allen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## HOSTAGES AND HOSTAGE-TAKING IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

in Rome's development.<sup>28</sup> One does not have to look far into other periods and regions to find that the practice was an integral component of all ancient warfare, Rome aside. Demetrius's own predecessor in the Macedonian royalty, Philip II, had spent time as a hostage in Thebes from 367 to 364 BCE with important consequences, long before Rome held international attention; the stories of detainees in the Peloponnesian War, whether they be of Spartans on Sphacteria or of Mytileneans following their revolt against Athens, gave Thucydides opportunities for his most significant set speeches.<sup>29</sup> An interest in the experience of hostages (mythical though they are) is arguably at the very origins of recorded history: Herodotus, in his first book – his first passage, in fact – tells the story of Io, a princess of Argos, who was seized by Phoenician traders.<sup>30</sup> For Herodotus, the event was loaded with significance, as it set off a chain reaction of retaliations in kind: the Greeks responded by “kidnapping” Europa from Tyre, and then Medea from the shores of the Black Sea, and the “East,” or rather Troy, then came back to steal Helen. The seesaw of vengeful kidnapping was brought to an end when the Greeks, instead of abducting yet another princess, launched their thousand ships. So ran the string of events that, according to Herodotus, defined the international tensions of the Persian Wars in the fifth century BCE and lingered in the minds of Darius and Xerxes, Miltiades and Leonidas.

Most of the major initiatives in foreign policy and warfare during the Roman Republic and early Principate involved hostages in some way. The first hostages to receive serious attention in the literary sources are those that arrived in the decade or so following the end of the Second Punic War in 202 BCE. Several high-profile triumphs made their way down the Via Sacra during this generation, and detailed reports of hostages are preserved in treaties with the Aetolian League in Greece in 189 and with the Seleucid monarchy in Syria in 188, and incidental references are made to hostage groups from Spain, northern Italy,

<sup>28</sup> See earlier, note 10.

<sup>29</sup> Philip II: Diod. Sic. 15.67.4; Dio Chrys. *Or.* 49.5; Plut. *Mor.* 178C, *Pel.* 26.4; Just. *Epit.* 6.9.7, 7.5.1–3. On Mytilene and Sphacteria: Thuc. 3.37–48 and 4.17–20. On the hostageship of Philip II, see Aymard 1954 and later and on hostages in Greek history in general, see Amit 1970 and Panagopoulos 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Hdt. 1.1–4.