

## Squelching Rumors: L. Aemilius Paullus in Livy 44

Lucius Aemilius Paullus (*cos.* 182, 168) accepted the command for his second consulship with weighty expectations. Roman soldiers had been fighting and dying on the outskirts of Macedonia for three years. Rome was weary and ready to move on. As Livy explains, a single question dominated those consular elections: *quos in annum consules ad finiendum tandem id bellum crearent* (44.17.1). As the elected consul with the responsibility for the war against Perseus, Aemilius Paullus needed to bring the conflict to a swift conclusion. But his was a precarious position, with the hope of a triumph pressed hard by the potential for mounting frustration in Rome and political enemies (Briscoe 1982: 1008). He faced risks *domi militiaeque*: the danger of the phalanx abroad and the danger of public opinion at home.

This paper will explore how Livy's Aemilius Paullus recognizes and defuses the time-bomb of public opinion with rumor as its fuse. He addresses the problem first in a speech to a *contio* at Rome (44.22). He then speaks with his soldiers twice, once preemptively (44.34) and then in response to whispered criticism (44.38-39). The consul did not want rumors to compromise his command.

Rumors mattered in Ancient Rome because "political knowledge was spread by word of mouth" (Laurence 1994: 63). Laurence's discussion places the Forum at the epicenter of information wending its way through the roads and cross-roads of Rome, gaining interpretive momentum as it grows more distant from its source. A close correlation exists between these rumors and the carefully husbanded reputation of men like Aemilius Paullus. Cicero and Clodius, for example, deploy rumor to blacken each other's reputations (Laurence 1994), while Caesar's assassins misread rumor and so underestimated the esteem in which public opinion held the *dictator perpetuus* (Yavetz 1974). This dangerous undercurrent of rumor surfaces most powerfully in the poetry of Vergil, who famously transforms this mundane reality into a mythological monster (*Aeneid* 4.173-197).

Aemilius Paullus knew this particular enemy. In his speech at Rome, he explicitly asks his audience to believe his official correspondence rather than unverified reports (44.22.6), and he offers a warning about the deleterious impact of rumor (44.22.7). His attention and approach to the problem of rumor stems from a historical

awareness. He cites the determination of the famed Cunctator, Quintus Fabius Maximus, in pursuing the correct policy rather than the popular one (44.22.10). Perhaps the consul conjured a memory from his youth about advice given to his father during the Second Punic War. That same Q. Fabius Maximus, as dictator, had warned the elder Lucius Aemilius Paullus (*cos.* 219, 216) to beware the talk of a fickle populace:

*Resistes autem adversus famam rumoresque hominum si satis firmus steteris, si te neque collegae vana gloria neque tua falsa infamia moverit.* (22.39.18)

Aemilius Paullus the son, however, chooses not merely to endure rumors and to disdain their audience but to anticipate them. He embarks on the arduous task of rumor control. A modern illustration of the difficulty of that task is found in the struggles of Proctor and Gamble to end stories about support for Satanism (Kimmel 2004, 4-14).

Aemilius Paullus chooses openness as his weapon against rumor, a suitable strategy in light of the modern conclusion that “rumors reestablish the transparency of power” (Kapferer 1990: 14). He speaks to the citizens of Rome, he speaks to his soldiers. He acknowledges the inherent tension in the circumstances. And he asks both audiences to trust him to do his job even as he invites advice brought through proper channels rather than aired as rumor. Aemilius Paullus works to build trust in order to limit the ambiguity on which rumor thrives.

## Works Cited

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