

Understanding the *Plebs*: Decision-making and the Emotions

This paper participates in a larger investigation into the nature of public decision-making during the late Roman Republic. While debate continues regarding the potentially democratic nature of the Republic (Tatum 2009), Rome's institutions provided the *plebs Romana* the capacity, at least, to exercise substantial popular power. This leaves us with a paradox, however, for during the late Republic tangible benefits to the *plebs*, as either material support or reforms, were rare (Morstein-Marx 2004 : 286). One might fairly question, then, to what extent the *plebs* pursued their own advantage and were driven by rational self-interest. The inter-disciplinary field of emotions studies, the foundations of which are rooted in exploring the relationship between rationality and the emotions, offers valuable perspectives on social behavior that will assist this inquiry (Lewis, Haviland-Jones, Barrett 2008, Kapust 2008). I therefore hope to contribute to the larger discussion by analyzing the role emotions played in decision-making during the late Republic.

To limit the scope of this project I will focus on how contemporary sources, here Sallust and Cicero, perceived the *plebs Romana* operating in terms of collective decision-making. An examination of the evidence reveals that these sources believed the *plebs* were frequently subject to, and thus motivated by, the emotions and passions to a notably greater degree than the Roman aristocracy. This perspective is confirmed in theory through Sallust's historiography and in practice through Cicero's deliberative oratory. There existed numerous techniques a skilled orator might use to take advantage of the *plebs'* emotional disposition (Webb 1997, Fjelstad 2003).

Sallust's portrayals of decision-making in *Bellum Iugurthinum* juxtapose the emotions of the *plebs* with the self-interest of the nobility. The persuasive pieces Sallust fashions for

Memmius before the people and Adherbal (twice) to the senate effectively illustrate this point. Surviving fragments from Sallust's *Historiae* further emphasize the role of the passions through a thematic focus on apathy. In Sallust's narrative commentary on the major events occurring during the time-frame of his monograph, including Rome's decision to commit to war and the forces behind Marius' rise, the passions of the *plebs Romana* play a significant role.

In Cicero, we have the opportunity to see the themes and perceptions of passions versus self-interest explored in Sallust put into practice in *de Lege Agraria I* and *II*. On the topic of Rullus' proposed legislation of 63 BCE, Cicero addresses first the senate and then a public *contio*. The different strategies that he employs in each speech are worth noting as much as the outcome: Cicero is able to harness the emotions of the *plebs Romana* to defeat a bill ostensibly to the benefit of that very body. The strategy here, and in other *contiones*, has been overlooked; explanations tend to point to Cicero's rhetorical scheme of adopting a disingenuous stance of *popularis* (Hopwood 2007, Tan 2008). Cicero's deployment of fear, indignation, and anger towards the prospect of Rullus' proposed *decemviri*, however, varies significantly depending on his audience and proves to carry enormous weight in the setting of a *contio*. This alteration in tactics is perhaps surprising given that Cicero does note the power of emotions in forensic oratory (particularly in *de Oratore*), and so may also prompt inquiry into potentially unexpected differences in rhetorical tactics between forensic and deliberative oratory.

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