

Poverty and Provinciality: New *Frugalitas* in Flavian Rome

When Pliny the Younger recommended Minicius Acilianus as a worthy husband, he described Minucius' hometown of Brixia as "a town in our Italy which still retains and preserves much honest frugality and ancient rusticity" (1.14.4). His statement (which Sherwin-White 2003 117 calls indicative of "the influences moulding the tone of Roman society in the Flavian age") connects his young charge to perhaps the most standard associative package in Roman moral thought – that ancient times were morally superior – but also asserts that the moral standards of those ancient times persist, out in Brixia. This description implies that frugality and rusticity have faded in places outside *Italia*, while slyly asserting Pliny's in-group status through the inclusion of *nostra*.

Pliny's presentation of a pristine and frugal Italy fits into an emergent intellectual trend under the Flavians and continuing forward which imagined Roman Italy and the provinces as places which preserved the virtue of *frugalitas*. Previously, antique, rustic virtues were typically situated in abstract, historical space, associated with Rome the city but residing in the spatially-undefined agrarian past. But during the Flavian age, the cultural discourse about poverty and rusticity acquired a specific locative dimension. Virtuous frugality and claims about revived "antique" morality moved from residing only in the Roman past to the imperial hinterland, to Italy and beyond.

Changes in cultural notions of *frugalitas* came as a result of several historical trends, one of which occurred at the imperial center. The advent of Vespasian, according to Tacitus and Suetonius, brought a wave of moral and financial refurbishment to Rome in the persona of a gruff, pragmatic, penny-pinching Italian. The centrality of *frugalitas* as a core component of his character and propaganda contrasted deliberately with the

financial irresponsibility and waste of some of his predecessors, especially Nero. His imperial self-image involved a conscious presentation of himself as the antithesis of *luxuria*. Vespasian's rough persona coincided with his parading of his undistinguished Italian origin, promoting himself as deliberately non-Roman, as political outsider (Suetonius *Vespasian* 12). We can view the political afterlife of this imperial plank of self-presentation in similar associations about money which adhere to Titus and Domitian, and in how Trajan, a non-Roman himself, paid special attention to the welfare of Italy during his reign.

Another aspect of the new discourse surrounding *frugalitas* was the presence of a receptive elite audience: the men at the center of empire were less Roman than ever before. The ongoing process of expanding the senatorial franchise outward to locations deemed satisfactorily virtuous and Romanized resulted in a Senate not only willing to accept outside members, but which was substantially non-Roman in terms of its membership. Tacitus describes old Roman families ruined by decline and profligacy as replaced by "new men from colonies, towns, and even provinces" who "bring in their household thrift" (*Annals* 3.55). While Syme 1958 too easily accepts the victory of "native parsimony" (444), the rise of the new provincials and of the new *frugalitas* intersected at both real and ideological levels. As the cultural idea of poverty found a definite place outside the imperial center, it coincided with an age where the center of power no longer originated in the city aristocracy. Virtues on display from outsiders and parvenus coincided with the decline of many traditional Roman aristocrats, their decay expressed as a failure of morality - financial and ethical suicide yielding to practical, provincial frugality.

Pliny had good reason to buy into and replicate the modified language of *frugalitas* in his work; as an Italian himself, he stood to gain from incorporating such a virtue into his own public persona. In this category he was joined by many of the major authors from his era: Tacitus the (Narbonese) Gaul, Martial the Spaniard, Suetonius the African, his correspondent *princeps* Trajan. They represent how newcomers to Rome could employ the traditional language of Roman moralism for their own benefit, linking the moral character of their homelands to antique virtues as a way to be "more Roman than the Romans" (a strategy not limited to this period; cf. Hopkins 1983 38), and to contrast themselves with entrenched senatorials. Political changes had exposed the malleability of *frugalitas* as a constituent factor in self-presentation, opening up a space for non-Romans to place their origins within a grand narrative of the moral-economic decay of a specific old-fashioned Roman ideal.

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