

Intimate Gossip and Political Power in Rome

Recent scholarship has questioned how active and informed Roman citizens were in their government. Some have noted the small public spaces and exclusive times available for speeches and voting (Mouritsen 2001) while others have noted the elite control of information (Morstein-Marx 2004). Despite the importance of informed voting in a republic like Rome, there has been little study into other sources of information outside of Ray Laurence's 1994 study "Rumour and Communication in Roman Politics" which rests far too heavily on a top-down model. This paper will re-evaluate the issues these authors highlight by looking at peer-to-peer communication instead of mass communication and public ritual.

Romans were avid gossips. Cicero delights in sharing and hearing news about the Bona Dea scandal in his early letters, Catullus and Martial lambaste their peers for their sexual peccadillos, and Ovid describes workers gossiping while at work. Suetonius used graffiti in Rome to show the public opinion of emperors and the graffiti of Pompeii shows men boasting of their sexual prowess and insulting their rivals. In addition Romans welcomed information from travelers met on the road or public places. Such unofficial forms of communication were essential to the governing of Rome and were not necessarily controlled by the elite.

This paper will show the viability of this system of information and the influence it may have had on politics. First, by looking at sources like those mentioned above I will demonstrate that there was an interest in sharing politically relevant information among Romans of all classes, not just the elite. Next, sociologists studying gossip have noted that gossip has two purposes: to encourage in-group behavior and as a form of reciprocal exchange (Bergmann 1993). Both of these aspects were important in Roman politics since political influence was tied so closely to personal reputation and since *amicitia* was so reciprocal (Morstein-Marx 2004;

Brunt 1988, “*Amicitia*”). Then I will test how accurate person to person communication could be by looking at examples from the Catilinarian conspiracy and the use of mathematical models (Bailey 1957). In conclusion I will argue that Romans of all classes had access to fairly reliable information outside of public speeches and enjoyed sharing information that would directly influence politics based on Roman social norms.

Bibliography

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