

Role-Playing, Twitter, and the Roman Republic: Reliving the Post-Punic War Senate in the Classroom

As Classicists, we have an unmatched, alluring weapon at our disposal: the Roman Republic. Full of charismatic politicians, a vaunted, highly assimilative history, and a dynamic, relatable government, Roman History consistently draws high enrollments. Of course, an understanding of the operations of the Roman Republic are incredibly useful for the modern citizen of democratic states. The Framing Generation used the Roman Republican system and the Polybian “balance of powers” as fundamental starting points for creating the U.S. Constitution. The relevance of the Republic, both theoretically and practically, has tremendous potential to contribute to our students’ understanding of their own democracies through an exploration of ancient Rome.

I wanted to take the potential for exploration even further. Inspired by Avalon Hill’s 1990 “Republic of Rome” board game and the recent rise in role-playing experiences in the classroom (led by the community involved in *Reacting to the Past*), I decided to try my own hand at creating one for my class, “The Republic of Rome and the Evolution of Executive Power,” an intermediate-level course of 35 students. The concept I developed was to place students into a Roman senate, when Rome was the unquestioned power of the Mediterranean. Since the “Roman Republic” was hardly a static entity and held no single definable set of constitutional circumstances for any length of time (Flower, 2010), I wanted to leap in just after a transitional period, around 190 BC, soon after the end of the Hannibalic War and Rome’s first concerted foray into Greece. By this time, the Roman Republic of the early 2nd century BCE is largely recognizable as “the” Republic—complete with full allotments of tribunes, quaestors, aediles, praetors, consuls,

proconuls, and censors—but without the instability that arose within a couple generations.

After lecturing on and discussing the historical, cultural, social, and constitutional background of Rome, the students took on the roles of senators for one month. My goal was for students to apply their newfound familiarity with the constitutional, social, and cultural background of the Roman Republic to survival and success in that same Republic. I structured their “Senatorial Session” so that each week in class time became the equivalent of a year. Each “July” (Friday), the students ran for office, attempting to accumulate influence among their fellow senators’ Roman tribes in order to win election. In the meantime, they were collectively compelled to respond to various crises that they “heard” through the political rumor mill (our class Twitter feed). Crises ranged from domestic to foreign, military to civic, local to national. The path to success was easy for some, difficult for others. Very few senators were wealthy patricians, a great many more poor plebeians; very few were *consulares*, senatorial members for decades, a good many more newly elected quaestors, their senatorial *bona fides* to be determined imminently by a censor of potentially dubious judgment. Some had dutiful children, others family members whose private acts could potentially generate public scandal. Students became Roman senators expected to behave and act in a way conducive to the continued glory of the Republic, their *gens*, their patrons and clients, and themselves (not necessarily in that order).

I have taught the class twice now, and the system I developed has been highly successful in generating reflection and understanding about the Roman Republican Constitution. It has also been incredibly rewarding, and has resulted in an experience that

the students talk about for years. Essentially, though I will not disdain advice, I primarily want to share my experience with my fellow teachers, to explain the highlights and difficulties of such a process, and especially, to highlight its myriad possibilities.

Bibliography

Flower, Harriet. 2010. *Roman Republics*. Princeton.