

The Patrician Allies of Two Troublesome Tribunes: The Nature of Republican Alliances

The debate on the nature of Roman politics during the Republic has traditionally focused on the role of factions (or some synonym or circumlocution of the term) and the extent to which these elite groupings pervaded and controlled the Roman government (Münzer 1920, Gelzer 1912, Syme 1939). Other key questions are: who composed these factions, how long did they last, and what was the basis for the connection between members. The idea of long-term alliances based solely on kinship and identifiable by means of prosopography and patterns in office holding has come under scrutiny over the past decades (for example, Brunt 1988, North 1990, Millar 1998). A close analysis of the sources, especially the late Republican evidence offered by Cicero, indicates that alliances were much more often short-lived, pragmatic connections based on political philosophies and opinions rather than any long-term kinship ties. It is possible that the political situation described by Cicero represents a change in the system as a result of the demagoguery and the impact of leaders such as Marius, Sulla and Pompey. Since the politics of the late Republic are in some ways a break from “routine politics,” it is therefore difficult to extrapolate back to role of alliances in the early and middle Republic from these accounts. However, it is unlikely that the types of alliances that Cicero describes did not exist at all in the Early and Mid-Republic, so how do we understand these pragmatic, short-term alliances for the periods of Roman history for which we lack a Cicero? In this paper, I point to two moments where there seem to be unexpected, short-term alliances which are solidified in a common way – intermarriage.

Instead of painting a broad picture of the nature of political alliances in the Roman Republic, this paper will focus on a few examples for which the source material is (slightly) better than usual to try and understand the motivations behind individual historical actors. One

type of alliance which seems to go against the traditional model is intermarriage between established, patrician elites and tribunes of the plebs who are generally considered *populares* leaders or “rabble-rousers.” These tribunes of the plebs tried to pass legislation which is characterized as explicitly against desires of the leading senators. The alliance between M. Fabius Ambustus and C. Licinius Stolo, resulting in the Licinian-Sextian rogations, is a parallel to the famous alliance of Tiberius Gracchus and Appius Claudius Pulcher. Both were political alliances where marriage was used as a sign of allegiance and breaking with previous “factions.” Often the argument for political support reverses the cause and effect of marriage alliances. The logic being that because these groups are already connected by marriage, support for political agendas will naturally follow. Instead I would suggest that the political alliance must have been a precursor to marriage, not the result of it. I argue that both M. Fabius Ambustus and Appius Claudius were motivated by a desire to improve their reputation amongst the plebs at a time when it was suffering. These alliances went against the traditional behaviors and political philosophies of their *gens*, and instead were short-term and pragmatic. These case studies force us to call into question some of the master narrative of the Early and Mid-Republic where we see members of various *gentes* following traditional familial policies for centuries. My paper argues that instead of a shift from a Republic dominated by long-term factions into a Republic where politics had devolved into short and fleeting connections, these two styles of alliances co-existed throughout. It is clear that short-term alliances did and could exist in the early years of the Republic and are therefore not a sign of the breakdown of the system, but are instead a symptom of our sources.

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