

Watching the World Go By: Non-elite Viewership of Roman Processional Movements

The ancient Romans had a special relationship with ritualized group movement. Formal processions such as triumphs, funerals, and weddings were occasions for the display of prestige and wealth. For the elite, even everyday movement was always done with an entourage. Lictors accompanied magistrates and slaves went everywhere with their masters. Noblemen advertised their status through the size of their escort. But for non-elites—people without entourages—what did this performance mean? This paper will consider the lived experiences of non-elites as audiences of ancient Roman processions. It will first consider their viewership of processions depicted on monuments and coins. These two categories of material evidence are fruitful for exploration. Processional scenes are common on monuments and, unlike private wall-paintings for instance, their public nature meant that all sorts of people could see them. Coins, too, were used by everyone. The paper will also consider the non-elite's experience of witnessing a live procession.

The first example is a marble relief depicting a funeral procession on a tomb from Amiternum. The relief, seemingly from the late Republic, decorates the tomb of a freedman. As Harriet Flower points out, this scene is unlike other depictions of funerals in text or art (Flower 1996: 98-9). It lacks the parade of ancestor masks (*imagines*), the demonstration of noble lineage that was such an important part of aristocratic funerals. What it does feature, however, are the musicians and hired mourners that made funerals the showy, noisy events they were. These performers usually came from the lowest rungs of society, but they feature prominently on the art of a freedman who, as a former slave, once belonged to the same class. This relief shows how ideas about status changed the way art was created. The musicians and mourners in the scene occupy, and therefore make up for, the freedman's lack of distinguished ancestors. But it also

makes us question the attitudes toward such performers in elite funerals. To be featured on a permanent work of art, even just anonymously on a freedman's tomb, was one way a faceless, nameless person could make an indelible mark. And for those who saw this art, this was a reminder that freedmen and slaves could be featured together in a grand procession, a privilege normally reserved for the elite.

The next example is a silver denarius from 54 BCE showing M. Iunius Brutus accompanied by an *accensus* and two lictors wielding *fasces*, the axes that symbolized political power. Ida Östenberg's observations about this coin contribute to her argument that "the elite and their escorts were potent and inclusive moving images that communicated with the cityscape and its people and shaped Roman views about society." (Östenberg 2015: 16) This denarius served as a constant reminder that its issuer, Brutus, never went anywhere alone, even if he was simply being transferred from hand to hand. An imitation of this scene, a magistrate on foot with two lictors, appears on a gold coin issued in Dacia, showing the spread of this imagery to the provinces. Other coins feature *fasces* by themselves and other symbols of power. What did these images mean for the average Roman, who would never attain political office? In our modern world, saturated with audio-visual presentations of media, we forget that silent, static images and monuments were often the primary, if not sole, means of mass communication in ancient times.

This paper will also consider processions as artworks in themselves. Eve D'Ambra has explored the idea of the funeral pyre as an ephemeral monument (D'Ambra 2015). Processions are similarly ephemeral as performance art. From Petronius' *Satyricon* comes a description of Trimalchio's trip home from the baths, a choreographed mobile show complete with a litter, medal-wearing runners, a separate cart for his favorite, and a personal flute serenade (Petr. *Sat.* 28). Like the owner of the Amiternum tomb, the man at the center of this procession is a

freedman. The author of this account, believed to be a member of Nero's court, presents the attitude of the elite toward the *nouveau riche*: Trimalchio is the ultimate caricature of a flashy, tasteless freedman. This paper moves away from that characterization to view Trimalchio's parade through the eyes of a bystander, who may actually have found it fun!

Bibliography

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