Pennies for the Public Man: Crowd-funded Funerals in the Early Republic

Livy's account of the 503 BCE death of Publius Valerius Publicola, one of the first consuls Rome ever knew, is escorted by a strange process. Because his family lacked the money for a proper funeral (2.16.7: *copiis familiaribus adeo exiguis et funeri sumptus deesset*), it was funded by public munificence (*de publico est datus*). Similar practices occur three times in the remaining sections of the text, all located between 503-460 BCE, and never again; the "public" aspect to these funerals is even more pronounced in the other two occurrences, which feature direct funding of an aristocratic funeral *en masse* by members of the plebeian order.

This paper will investigate the question of why these incidents only appear in the earliest narratives of the Roman Republic, and how they might be contextualized in terms of the mytho-historical past and the circumstances of Livy's own time. This will involve a consideration of Livy's thematic trajectories regarding the early Republic, as well as the situating of these funerary gestures within Roman practices of public mourning.

One key factor looks to be encapsulated within the name of the aforementioned Publius Valerius: two of the funerals commemorated men with the cognomen Publicola, and the third was for Menenius Agrippa, the successful aristocratic (and possibly plebeian: Ogilvie 1965) negotiator during the first Secession of the Plebs. From a narrative dimension, the reason for these isolated episodes may lay in the specifics of these historical characters' relationships with the Roman plebs. Had they been afforded exemplary post-mortem treatment because they possessed the common touch?

Lurking behind much of the first Republic books of Livy is the question of *concordia*, which also underlies this issue. Throughout this portion of the text he presents

the Republic as beset by potential revolutionaries fueled by class conflict, a problem mollified by measures such as the creation of the tribunes of the plebs and the Twelve Tables. These figures, in the grander scheme of Livy's text, may have served as exemplars for ensuring avenues for cooperation and concord between the Roman orders before the political mechanisms for doing so had been invented. As such, the narrative depicts them as rewarded after death by their social inferiors for their work in binding together a fractious citizen body.

Looking forward to Livy's time and social context, the aristocratic funeral provided a critical point of contact between mass and elite. Flower 1996 attests the depth of elite efforts to attract and entertain the public and evoke their power and prestige within the aristocracy and their support base in their *clientes* and the *populus*. Expressions of lower-class opinion were a feature of the aristocratic funeral (Milnor 2005: 34-5); the popular-funeral motif removes and inverts the normal element of self-promotion, so that even the impoverished members of the state could show their appreciation and advertise the virtues and reputation of the deceased.

The historical events of the Augustan Age might, additionally, speak to a Caesarian connection. Livy's own lifetime saw multiple instances of monetary gifts from ordinary citizens to the *princeps*, from birthday gifts to compensation for his house destroyed by fire (Suetonius *Augustus* 57). If similar gestures might be attached to figures of concord from the past, so might they apply to statesmen of the present, and vice versa. And not simply Augustus; his adoptive father had received a funeral greatly tied to his mass appeal. The shadows of the Caesars might supply an explanation for the portraits of the virtuous Livian *publicolae*, confined to the distant, unknowable past.

Bibliography

Flower, Harriet I. *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture*. Oxford,

1996.

Milnor, Kristina. *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life.*

Oxford, 2005.

Ogilvie, R.M. *A Commentary on Livy Books 1-5*. Oxford, 1965.