

Pietas, the *Vir Optimus* Debate of 204 BCE, and the Study of Roman Masculinity

In the waning years of the Hannibalic War, prodigies appeared in Rome in the form of stone showers falling from the sky. To expiate these signs, the Sibylline Books prescribed that the Magna Mater should come to Rome from her home in Asia Minor. The Senate formed a commission to acquire the goddess' image, which had taken on the form of a small meteorite. Along the way, the commissioners sought the advice of Delphi, which directed that, upon returning home, "they must take care that the best man (*vir optimus*) at Rome should receive her in hospitality" (Liv. 29.11.6). Despite having a long list of likely candidates who had demonstrated martial *virtus* throughout the long war, most notably P. Cornelius Scipio Africanus and Q. Fabius Maximus, the Senate chose the young and unaccomplished P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica, who was not even old enough for the quaestorship.

Nasica's selection has been an enigmatic one, both for Livy, who declined to offer a rationale, as well as for modern scholars, who have found in him few of the virile traits typically associated with ideals of Roman manliness. Some (Gruen 1990) view his selection as indicative of senatorial unwillingness to undertake a protracted debate as Rome prepared for the final confrontation with Hannibal. Others see him as a kind of paper tiger, in fact chosen because he *lacked* the traditional masculine superlatives which could allow him to use the honor to dominate the political landscape (Roller 1999; Pelikan Pittenger 2008).

Non-Livian sources from Diodorus Siculus onwards, however, consistently picture Nasica as an exemplar of *pietas*, a quintessential Roman trait whose most common feature besides religious piety centers on family and social relationships, in particular the devotion and sacrifice of youth for kin and country (Saller 1994; Noreña 2011: 71-77). Nasica's selection on

the basis of *pietas* should therefore be read as a declaration of the importance of youthful fidelity and sacrifice to fatherland in the midst of the Hannibalic struggle.

Nasica's *pietas* also had special significance for Rome's growing presence in the Greek East, and could only have reminded of Aeneas, whose storied journey to Rome was circulating at that time and helped to situate Rome within a wider Greek Mediterranean (Gruen 1995). In Vergil, the Magna Mater provides Aeneas with crucial assistance: she sends a burning star urging him to leave Troy, and timber from her sacred grove on Ida construct the ships in his fleet (Verg. *Aen.* 2.688-704, 788; 9.110-13; 10.156-7). A young man known for *pietas* was therefore especially suitable to serve as escort for the goddess, who had shared her home on Mt. Ida with Aeneas (Hes. *Theog.* 1009).

Finally, the selection of the "best man in Rome" on the basis of *pietas* calls for a reconsideration of Roman ideals of masculinity. Modern analyses seldom take notice of "softer" qualities such as *pietas*, and instead place primary emphasis on "harder," more traditional values such as military *virtus*, political *potestas*, and playing the penetrative role in the sexual act (McDonnell 2006; Williams [1999] 2010). And yet, it is the supposed pervasiveness of this model of male identity throughout Roman society that makes Nasica's selection as *vir optimus* so perplexing, as there is little to recommend him along these lines. Aggressive *virtus*, however, had little place in the *curia*, where a body of male peers reached *consensus* for the good of the *res publica*. The selection of Nasica on the basis of a cooperative virtue like *pietas* was therefore a statement by the Senate of how it conceived of its own political role. This paper contributes to recent scholarly discussions which have emphasized the importance of homosociality, or bonds between men, in regulating Roman political life (Masterson 2014).

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