

Deifying the People in Cicero's *Post Reditum ad Quirites*

In his speech to a popular assembly upon his return from exile in 57 B.C., Cicero appears to break with the prevailing religious ideology by assigning divine status to both the gods and the Roman people. While his rhetoric seems at times to rise to a sacrilegious pitch (esp. *Red. Pop.* 5, 18, 25), a careful reading of the speech shows that the Roman people retain their traditional position in the Republic's cosmic-political hierarchy: though sovereign in political matters, the people's good standing (*dignitas*) ultimately depends on the favor of the gods.

Though some have pointed to the use of religion in Cicero's speech *Post Reditum ad Quirites* as evidence of a pious ethos (Nicholson 1992, 104; Mack 1937, 43), the recurring theme of the *populus divinus* calls this into question, at least in relation to the gods. The orator pledges to show the same sort of *pietas* to the Roman people as the most devout men (*sanctissimi homines*) toward the gods, and he declares that the people's *numen* shall be for him "as weighty and sacred as that of the immortal gods" (*aeque mihi grave et sanctum ac deorum immortalium*, 18). One scholar has characterized these lines as simply preposterous (Cole 2013, 70). Indeed, the dominant religious ideology of the time assumed a "terrifying difference in power between gods and mortals" (Ando 2008, xvii) and held that the welfare of the Roman people depended on right relations with the gods (on this ideology in Cicero's works: Short 2012, 261-303).

At the same time, Cicero frames the speech in such a way as to suggest that there are limits to the people's deity. To begin, Jupiter is the "prime mover" of events. The speech opens with a version of a prayer the orator had previously offered to the god. He prayed that, if the actions he had taken during his consulship had been for the sake of

preserving the community (*conservandae civitatis causa*), the senate and people might be moved to recall him. Now, the one-time exile rejoices that his prayer has been answered through the judgment of the immortal gods (*iudicio deorum immortalium*), the testimony of the senate, the consensus of Italy, the admission of his enemies, and the people's divine and undying favor (*beneficio divino immortalique vestro*, 1). Though Cicero here suggests the Roman people possess a divine quality, he also implies they possess it only because they have acted in accordance with the will of the gods.

Behind the rhetorical facade of a *populus divinus* lies a general principle of Roman religion, one that Cicero would articulate the following year in his speech *De Haruspicum Responso*: the *numen* of the gods is responsible for the growth and security of Rome's empire, and her success is due to *pietas*, *religio*, and *sapientia*, "which has perceived that everything is ruled and directed by the *numen* of the gods" (*quod deorum numine omnia regi gubernarique perspeximus*, 19). Cicero concludes his speech *Post Reditum ad Quirites* on a similar note. While he declares that the people possess the power and sanctity of the immortal gods (*apud me deorum immortalium vim et numen tenetis*, 25), he concedes that they could not have retained their good standing (*dignitas*) had they not voted for his recall.

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