

Putting the Verse into Diversity: Triumphal Song and Soundscape as an Expression of Roman Pluralism

Ancient conceptions of diversity remain surprisingly under-examined in contrast to the increasing sophistication of scholarship on race and identity in Greco-Roman culture (Gruen 2011 *et al.*). Rarely do we encounter explicit evidence for perceptions of ethnic variety *within* a community, as opposed to attitudes toward outsiders. But the rhetoric and metaphors the Romans used in imagining alterity within their *civitas* provide untapped windows into their attitudes and practices regarding ethnic difference.

This paper explores Roman triumphal song as one mode of figuring cohesion amidst ethnic difference. Lobur's 2008 study of the ideal of *concordia* within Roman political discourse highlights the musical analogies behind civic mechanisms for maintaining harmony among heterogeneous interests and constituents (Connolly 2014 *et al.*). I will look at literal examples of collective song, as described by historians and poets, for the insight they yield into Roman ways of envisioning unity amidst difference. I turn specifically to the sonic landscape of the triumph because this procession was itself a representation and ritual enactment of Rome's incorporation of ethnic others into its body politic (Beard 2007).

In the accounts of Livy, Ovid, Pliny, Suetonius, and Tacitus, the triumph was a sonic cacophony of victims lamenting their fates, soldiers singing Fescennine verses, people shouting "io triumphe," and others perhaps grumbling about the fakery on display or flirting with one another on the sidelines. Yet from exile, Ovid remembers this ritual as one of civic unity – the very vision of the *consensus ordinum* from which he was excluded – as well as an icon of the process by which conquered peoples became Roman (*Tristia* 4.2; *Ex Ponto* 2.1, 3.4). These

poems mesh with philosophers' emphasis on mutability, and historians' interest in Romanization, in treating the triumphal procession as "a flattened-out wheel of fortune" (Pandey 2018: 235) that symbolically initiated victims' gradual transformation into Roman subjects, perhaps eventually citizens, soldiers, and senators (like Caesar's Gauls).

This ritual performance of *Romanitas* was not complete without the vociferous participation of plural, decentralized, ethnically diverse voices. Suetonius records numerous soldiers' songs mocking Julius Caesar, often for his overfamiliar dealings with the Gauls, the Bithynian king Nicomedes, and the Egyptian Cleopatra (*Vit. Iul.* 20, 49, 51, 79; cf. Cassius Dio 43.20). These songs served to equalize the leader with his multiethnic soldiers, victims, and sex partners and were soon on everyone's lips, providing a democratic auditory counterpoint to Caesar's growing supremacy within the state. The ritual cry of "io triumphe," an archaic phrase thought to derive from Greek via Etruscan, marked Rome's victory with a reminder of its cultural debt to bygone powers. Though urban spectators spoke a range of languages, they were united as co-participants in the triumph, and potential critics of its representation of Roman power, through cheers and jeers that needed no translation. During Caesar's quadruple triumph over Gaul, Egypt, Africa, and Pontus in 46 BCE, onlookers loudly pitied the Egyptian queen Arsinoe as she was paraded in chains, prompting Caesar to spare her life. Dio's observation that they were really lamenting their own private misfortunes (43.19) suggests that triumphal displays of dominance could also encourage cross-cultural comparison, even empathy, among onlookers who themselves had often endured captivity and dislocation.

The triumphal *vox populi* could even change history. Arsinoe was later murdered at her half-sister Cleopatra's behest (her supposed remains, incidentally, have recently factored into the controversy over Cleopatra's North African ancestry; cf. Meadows 2009). But the episode surely

informed Cleopatra's own determination to avoid triumphal display, prompting the heroic suicide that was remixed into Roman verse via Horace, *Odes* 1.37 and Vergil's Dido. The triumphal soundscape's ability to balance discrepant voices into a *concordia discors* finds a visual analogue in Aeneas' many-layered shield, whose portrait of Cleopatra's clamorous forces is not subsumed by, but rather resonates in creative opposition with, Augustus' orderly triumph and tributary peoples (*Aeneid* 8.675-728). Emperors from Augustus to Nero may have imagined themselves, like Apollo Palatine (cf. Miller 2009), as citharodes creating universal harmony. But the triumphal soundscape reminds us that chaos, clamor, and constructive discord equally underpinned Rome's multiethnic polity.

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