

## Roman Republicanism, Memory, and Identity: Cicero's *De Re Publica*

The late Republic witnessed a cultural and identity crisis in the Roman state as political, social, and military tensions produced increasing pressures on its republican form of government. Zarecki (2014), Atkins (2013), and others (e.g., Baraz. 2012) have demonstrated that Cicero used his philosophical works to address current political issues in the Roman state. Jan Assmann (2011), in a ground-breaking study, posits two types of memory: communicative memory, which refers to the diffuse transmission of memories in everyday life through orality; and cultural memory, which refers to objectified and institutionalized memories that can be stored, transferred, and reused down through generations by means of more ritualized and formalized speech. Cultural memory thus makes it possible to build a narrative picture of the past and through this process develop a stable image and an identity of that past. Cultural memory therefore preserves the symbolic institutionalized heritage to which individuals turn in order to construct their own identities and affirm themselves as part of a group. This is possible because the process of remembering involves normative aspects: “if you want to belong to a community, you must follow the rules of how and what to remember” (Assmann).

This paper contextualizes and provides a theoretical framework for Cicero's *De Re Publica* as one effort to reestablish a cohesive cultural memory that would unify competing factions in Rome. Set in 129, the dialogue imagines Scipio Africanus Minor and others discussing the role of justice in government and the ideal citizen in that government. Previous scholars (e.g., Wood. 1988; Asmis. 2004) have argued that the use of the past and the philosophical dialogue format serve to disguise and distance *De Re Publica* from the political controversies of Cicero's day. Yet Cicero wrote as a companion piece to *De Re Publica* the work *De Legibus* (Dyck. 2004), set in the present, and presenting a discussion about the practical

applications for the theories of the ideal state developed in *De Re Publica*. The pairing of the theoretical work with the practical work gives an immediacy to the dialogue set in the past and also a legitimacy to the urgency of civic engagement and repair of the current republic. David Kertzer (1988) argues that the power of political and social symbolism lies in the fact that such symbols emphasize political and social unity over perhaps vast differences in perception by each person, with no explicit articulation of those differences necessary. By appealing to a common, unarticulated, but universally shared belief in the justness of Rome's past and its former statesmen as represented in *De Re Publica* (Colish. 1999), Cicero is using that work, tied as it is to the present by its relationship with *De Legibus*, as a symbol in Kertzer's sense to create a cultural memory among the splintered, warring, and polarized factions in Rome in order to forge a new dialogue about the future of the Roman Republic.

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