

CHAPTER ONE

REPUBLICAN ROME'S
RHETORICAL PATTERN OF
POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Virtual Reality: To Win Fame and Practice Virtue

ROME, PAGAN or Christian, was a militaristic, patriarchal society. Virtuous behavior, the most noble form of which was self-sacrifice for the good of the state, generated honors.¹ Glory was reaped in battle, and, in turn, produced other honors for the soldier as well as his family and his descendants. All of Rome's leading families claimed such exemplary, virtuous family members. Glory also bestowed remembrance. Words in the form of inscriptions, speeches, or poems, for example, and artistic representations were vehicles of this remembrance.

Because war and battle played such a prominent role in this definition of the self, military glory was at the core of the honor-remembrance-immortality system. Glory initiated and perpetuated

¹ See W.V. Harris, *War and imperialism in Republican Rome, 327–70 B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 9–53; on p. 17: “Military success allowed them [the Roman aristocracy] to lay claim to, and to a considerable extent to win, the high esteem of their fellow-citizens – on one level *laus* [praise], on a higher level *gloria*.”

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the discourse. Each generation experienced the pressure at least to keep up with, if not to outperform, its ancestors. Death masks (*imagines*), displayed on the walls of homes, were visual reminders of forefathers. They were also periodically displayed in public, especially at a funeral of a family member. The second century BCE historian Polybius, a member of a prominent Greek family who came to Rome as a hostage after the battle of Pydna (168 BCE), writes:

On the occasion of public sacrifices, these masks are displayed and decorated with much care. When any distinguished member of the family dies, the masks are taken to the funeral and are worn by men who are considered most closely to resemble the original ancestor both in height and general bearing. . . . There could not easily be a more ennobling spectacle for a young man who aspires to win fame and practice virtue. For who would not be inspired by the sight of images of men renowned for their excellence, all together as if alive and breathing? What spectacle could be more glorious than this? Moreover, the speaker who delivers the oration of the deceased, after finishing that speech, goes on to relate the successes and achievements of each of the others whose images are present, beginning with the oldest. By this constant renewal of the famed excellence of brave men, the renown of those who performed the noble deeds is immortalized and the glory of those who have served their country is a matter of common knowledge and legacy for future generations. But the most important result is that young men are inspired to undergo every extreme for the common good in the hope of winning that glory that attends upon the brave.²

The images were meant to inspire the young “to win fame and practice virtue.” Combined with orations that reinforced the achievements of their prominent ancestors, they encouraged young

² Plb. 6.53.6–54.3; see also D.C. 56.34 and 42. On death masks and the power they symbolize see H.I. Flower, *Ancestor masks and aristocratic power in Roman culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

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men to do their utmost for their country. In return, the individual who sacrificed himself won lasting, intergenerational glory. His virtuous act made him extraordinary and immortal, and a hero was born. In ancient thought, a hero occupied a position between mortals and the gods. A hero was in the process of becoming divine or encapsulating both mortal and immortal aspects. Moreover, in the Roman belief system, a dead person, as long as s/he was remembered, was a god (*deus* or *dea*). The antiquarian Varro (116–27 BCE) classified *dii* (gods, the plural of *deus*) as deified entities, hence *dii manes* (translated as ‘the dead’ or ‘spirits of the dead’), and *divi* (‘deified ones’) as eternal.³

Religion played an essential role in upholding the socio-symbolic structure by which Roman society defined itself. Rome’s acquisition of empire, it was believed, was the result of the exact execution of a traditional formula, a prayer or a ritual act, at the appropriate time. In other words, the gods were well disposed toward the Romans as long as they performed their religious duties properly. Roman religion was inherently conservative. Ritual practices were handed down from generation to generation. While the adherence to tradition made Roman religion, on the one hand, static, on the other hand, newcomers to the Roman empire brought their own religious practices, which were integrated into the Roman system. Roman religion was in this aspect dynamic. Rome’s senate, the socio-political elite, was the political body that oversaw the introduction of new gods and cults. Among its peers was the head of Roman religion, the *pontifex maximus*.

The virtues of the ancestors, the *mos maiorum*, operated in the same way as religion did; they gave structure. The established discourse continued, fed by generations of men. They operated within a shared behavioral code structure grounded in traditional values. Or, put differently, these men were brought into line and their

³ Var. frg. 424 = Serv. A. 5.45. When the senate decreed that Julius Caesar and subsequent emperors were to receive apotheosis, they became, in this sense, gods. The epithet given to a deified emperor was *divus* (deified one).

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actions regulated with the goal of furthering the state. If the state benefited from these actions, the benefactors in turn reaped rewards for themselves and their families. Originally, this dynamic ethos of doing one's utmost for the state had been anchored within a family but with Rome's acquisition of empire, beginning roughly in the fifth century BCE, it expanded to become the overarching discourse of the nobility. Mythic history provided many examples of nobles demonstrating virtuous excellence for the well-being (*salus*) of the state. These heroes formed a "virtual reality" of a Roman ancestry that a political leader could activate and employ.

Creation of a Public Image: Rome's Virtuous Man

ROME'S TRADITIONAL moral-political concepts, the ancestral customs (*mos maiorum*), have been the subject of detailed studies.⁴ Roman literature of the early third century BCE and the funerary inscriptions honoring members of an elite Roman family, the Cornelia Scipiones, most often determine the point of departure for these discussions. A surviving fragment by the poet Ennius presents an additional framework. Ennius (239–169 BCE) came from a leading family of Rudiae (modern Rugge near Lecce) in Calabria, a town where Oscan, the indigenous language, Greek, and Latin were spoken. The Romans had annexed the region in the mid-third century BCE. Ennius served in the Roman army and was brought to Rome by Marcus Porcius Cato, Rome's moral conscience of the post-Second Punic War period, in 204 BCE. In Rome, Ennius

⁴ Scholarly inquiries into the customs and authority of the ancient Romans began to appear when Germany slipped into a totalitarian dictatorship in the early 1930s. This, in fact, repeats a traditional pattern. In times of political transition, ideologies shift and intellectual pursuits tend to focus on topics that run parallel to contemporary moral and socio-political phenomena. The intellectual, the scholar, the researcher, like the proverbial canary in the coalmine, picks up the imminent change of condition. This awareness can then be transferred or deflected onto a research project; in essence, the project serves as political involvement in an environment that progressively cuts down any mode of free speech.

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became the protégé of Scipio Africanus, the victor over Hannibal, and Scipio Nasica. His *Annals*, an epic poem consisting of 18 books, of which 600 lines survive, describe Rome's history from Aeneas's coming to Italy until Ennius's own day, a period dominated by Rome's struggle against the Carthaginian Hannibal (the Second Punic War, 218–201 BCE). Ennius was the first Latin poet to adopt the dactylic hexameter of Greek epic.⁵ His choice of meter set the standard for the genre and, until Vergil's composition of the *Aeneid*, Ennius's *Annals* were the didactic tool of choice to present the story of Rome's foundation and acquisition of empire. The production of Rome's first national epic is strongly linked to one of Rome's most distinguished families, the Scipiones, just as its successor epic, Vergil's *Aeneid*, would be connected to the emperor Augustus.

A fragment of Ennius's *Annals* reads: *moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque* ["the Roman state stands firm because of ancient customs and men"].⁶ The Roman state was built upon ancient customs (*mores antiqui* = *mos maiorum*) on the one hand and men on the other. An integral feature of this behavioral code, the ancestral customs, was that a noble's duty was to increase the level of his family's achieved glory. Men (*virī*) who displayed *virtus* (manliness, courage, virtue)⁷ attained glory, which was everlasting. Those whose ancestors had demonstrated virtue attained glory and belonged to Rome's nobility. Thus, such a man distinguished himself as well as his family from all others. To be a man, the gendered entity, meant to compete, be exceptional, and, if possible, outdo one's peers. Cicero's description of the interaction of Roman boys points very nicely to this.

With what earnestness they pursue their rivalries! How fierce their contests! What exultation they feel when they win, and what shame when they are beaten! How they dislike reproach!

⁵ O. Skutsch (ed.), *The Annals of Q. Ennius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁶ Enn. *Ann.* 500 = Skutsch (ed.), *The Annals of Q. Ennius*, p. 156.

⁷ On manliness, *virtus*, and being a man see M. McDonnell, *Roman Manliness. Virtus and the Roman Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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How they yearn for praise! What labors will they not undertake to stand first among their peers!⁸

What were determining factors for little boys remained the same for adults. Ultimately, success in war brought territorial gain to the state and glory to the individual who outperformed his peers in military exploits.⁹ The two highest annual political offices, those with *imperium* (basically, power over life and death), the consulship and the praetorship, came with the right to lead legions. The two consuls, in fact, served as commanders-in-chief during their one-year tenure. Competing for, and holding, political office translated into prestige, so that the higher the office, the greater a Roman's reputation. The system worked as long as there were mechanisms in place to control violence; in the external sphere, wars and battles were waged and in the internal arena, there was peer competition for political offices. These mechanisms were linked to discipline (*disciplina*) and the traditional behavioral code, essentially the rules of conduct.

Rome had continued success, or in Ennius's words stood firm, as long as its citizens adhered to agreed rules of conduct. The word order of the Ennian fragment is telling: "the ancient customs" and "the men" frame "the Roman state." A successful Roman man was competitive yet disciplined and was in the public sphere. The latter provided the mechanism for the behavioral controls. Whenever

⁸ Cic. *Fin.* 5.22.61. The translation is from C. A. Barton, *Roman honor: The fire in the bones* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 11. Barton deals with the emotion of honor but she is fully aware that "the values of the ancient Romans, especially during the Republic, were overwhelmingly those of a warrior culture." Barton's *The sorrows of the ancient Romans: The gladiator and the monster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) gives some additional insight into the Roman understanding of honor. See especially pp. 176–87. W. Blösel, "Die Geschichte des Begriffes *mos maiorum* von den Anfängen bis zu Cicero," in B. Linke and M. Stemmler (eds.), *Mos maiorum: Untersuchungen zu den Formen der Identitätsstiftung and Stabilisierung in der römischen Republik*, *Historia Einzelschriften* 141 (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2000), pp. 25–97, offers a survey of the development of the concept of ancestral customs. He concludes, pp. 90–91, that this ethos of the Roman nobility was of great legitimating and disciplinary power until the first century BCE, but then became nothing more than an "empty cliché." It had lost its cultural meaning.

⁹ Harris, *War and imperialism*, esp. pp. 17–27.

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the control mechanism and the checks-and-balances of government failed, the competition turned violent, became uncontrollable, and spilled inward. The political structure was thus vulnerable to internal upheaval.

The steady breakdown of Rome's political system in the late republican period is an excellent example of this inward turn.¹⁰ In their analysis of the problem, the Romans, however, explained the system's disintegration in moral rather than political terms.¹¹ The historian Sallust (86–35 BCE) provides us with an invaluable insight into Roman political language in which reflections about politics were couched in moral terms. Sallust, a new man (*novus homo*)¹² from Amiternum (north of modern Aquila) who had been expelled from the senate in 50 BCE for immoral behavior, knew what he was talking about. The actual reasons for his expulsion were most likely political – Sallust, the tribune of the people in 52 BCE, had trodden on senatorial toes. The expelled politician joined the ambitious Julius Caesar and thus found a way to return to politics. Sallust's last position, as governor of the newly formed province of Africa Nova (Eastern Numidia), was in 46 BCE. But again, when he returned to Rome after his gubernatorial tour, Sallust was charged with, but not convicted of, misconduct. Caesar may have intervened on his behalf, but nonetheless, Sallust withdrew from public life and devoted his time to historiography. In his work, the politician-turned-writer took as his subject Rome's political and moral decline since the destruction of Carthage (201 BCE).¹³ The more Romans embraced the fruits of empire and succumbed to luxury, Sallust reasoned, the more they lost their moral verve.

The “rhetoric of empire,” analogous to Roman historiography as represented by Sallust, was based on the ancestral customs. The

¹⁰ L. R. Taylor, *Party politics in the age of Caesar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949) addresses this problem with a particular focus on the ancestral customs.

¹¹ See Earl, *The moral and political tradition*, pp. 16–19.

¹² A “new man” was the first of his family to become a member of the Roman senate.

¹³ On Sallust as a historian see the reissued R. Syme, *Sallust* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002), esp. pp. 29–42.

nobility's behavioral code, which Wolfgang Blösel felt had lost its defining power by the first century BCE,¹⁴ remained a vital part of a discourse that, I believe, continues today among nations that have imperial ambitions. The demise of the republic would mark a fundamental change in that the virtuous actions of noble Romans now belonged to the emperor. It was he, not the victorious generals serving in the field, actively fighting, and winning battles, who celebrated triumphs. The military leader was no longer singled out for admiration as a result of his virtuous actions in accordance with the ancestral customs. There was no longer a choice of who was the most virtuous. The one who held the single most extraordinary political position, the emperor, was the embodiment of virtues. He was the living, symbolic reality of Rome's behavioral code. Everybody and everything was dependent on him, the center, as he reflected outward and bound peripheries to himself. He was the living discourse, a dynamic embodiment ever-amassing powers, pronouncing prohibitions, and generating fear as well as respect. Still, the rhetorical discourse established in the republic remained the same. In his words, his behavior, even in his performance, the chosen one, the father of the country, had to display moral stature at the highest level.

The rise of Rome's virtuous man was closely associated with the city's military engagement with Carthage. The first two wars with Carthage (264–241 BCE and 218–201 BCE) made Rome the pre-eminent military power in the Mediterranean basin. The integration of Greece into the empire in the first half of the second century BCE brought a measure of cultural self-confidence to Rome. The principal spokesperson of this new confidence was Cato the Elder (214–149 BCE), a new man from Tusculum (near modern Frascati). He was the first of his well-to-do equestrian family to enter the Roman senate and thus become a member of Rome's ruling aristocratic elite, the *nobilitas*. This group's ethos, the ancestral customs, had begun as family traditions.¹⁵ Competition marked Greco-Roman life and

¹⁴ Blösel, "Die Geschichte des Begriffes *mos maiorum*," p. 85.

¹⁵ Blösel, "Die Geschichte des Begriffes *mos maiorum*," pp. 46–56.

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so, not surprisingly, Rome's elite vied for leading positions in the resulting social hierarchy. The function of the ancestral customs was twofold: it served both to establish ground rules for the competing aristocracy and as a barrier to be overcome by newcomers.¹⁶ A new man like Cato the Elder depended on the support of patrons from the already well-situated elite, along with his own competitiveness, to outdo rivals. After all, new men were at a disadvantage because they lacked ancestors (*maiores*) who had paved the way to excellence.¹⁷ New men were obliged to outperform those who had the advantage of ancestors, thus ensuring that these newcomers to the senate would more intensely embrace the traditional ethical values.

It is not surprising then that Cato the Elder, like Cicero after him (both of whom addressed the moral code of Rome's elite in their writings), became a paragon and champion of the ancestral customs, indeed, of Romanness itself. New men did not and could not question the ground rules because these rules were the only vehicle used to climb the socio-political ladder. Challenges to the ancestral customs would only occur when socio-political positions were no longer determined by Rome's aristocratic elite but by a single person, the emperor, the most extraordinary member of that elite.

Literature and inscriptions from the second century BCE provide our first insight into the formation and the discussion of "the virtuous Roman." Among the writers, it was Cato the Elder who insisted that Latin be established as a cultural equivalent of Greek and made virtue the focus of his account of Rome's origins (*Origines*). In Cato's understanding though, military valor and self-sacrifice were not the sole province of Rome's aristocratic elite. The Roman people (*populus Romanus*), in Cato's context Rome's fighting men, also

¹⁶ On this class ethos and its family as well as state impact see once more Blösel, "Die Geschichte des Begriffes *mos maiorum*," p. 53.

¹⁷ In *Phil.* 13.7 [15], Cicero says of Marcus Lepidus, the pontifex maximus, that he, Lepidus, has precedents, both ancient and of his own family, he can follow. Later on in the same speech, 13.21 [50], Cicero says of Pompey's son: "He has acted with heart and soul on behalf of the state corresponding to his father and his ancestors with his own accustomed [in a sense linked to ancestors] virtue, energy, and good will. . . ."

demonstrated these behavioral characteristics. That they did so rigorously, Cato further argued, was ultimately due to their Sabine origin.¹⁸ These two points – an inclusive Roman group of ancestors and the Sabine origin of the ideal behaviors – have much to do with Cato's own background. Tusculum was Sabine and Cato was new to the capital's aristocracy (*homo novus*). Thus, the importance of ancestors to any definition of Romanness was established. The other new man, Cicero, from Arpinum (modern Arpino), went further and developed the ethical meaning of “our ancestors” (*nostri maiores*).

Whether Cato intended to criticize the aristocratic elite's rhetoric is difficult to say since the surviving evidence is fragmented. He did, nonetheless, postulate that the Romans had emulated the *mores* of the Sabines, a statement that made the Roman elite imitators rather than originators. Early Roman history, which can also be labeled mythic history, made the Sabine Numa Rome's second king. Numa was, in contrast to Rome's founder Romulus, a man of thought and peace. The historian Livy has Numa realize that a city born of force and arms (*vi et armis*) had to be founded anew on laws and customs (*legibusque ac moribus*).

He recognized that in wartime – since warfare brutalized the mind of men – this was not possible. Thinking that the aggressiveness of the people might be mitigated by the disuse of arms, he built the temple of Janus at the foot of the Aventine as indicator of peace and war; open, it indicated that the state was at war, closed, that all surrounding people were at peace.¹⁹

Numa, Livy suggested, replaced a state of perpetual violence with one of law and order. Roman brutes were transformed into civilized citizens obeying laws and customs. They lived in an organized

¹⁸ Cato *Origines* frg. 51 in H. W. Peter (ed.), *Historicorum Romanorum reliquiae* (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1967), p. 70 = Caton, *Les Origines: fragments*, texte établi, trad. et commenté par M. Chassignet (Paris: les Belles lettres, 1986), pp. 26–27, and, especially, Blösel, “Die Geschichte des Begriffes *mos maiorum*,” pp. 54–59.

¹⁹ Liv. 1.19.2–3.