The Many Faces of "the People" in the Ancient World
δῆμος – *populus* – 民 *min*

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Few words in the historian's vocabulary have such a wide semantic gulf as "the people." Add to this the vast range of different languages, cultures, and layers of time in which "the people" are invoked, and the term translates into a commonplace. The present volume reclaims some of the conceptual capacity of "the people" in history. It looks at the ancient worlds of Greece, Rome, and China through the lens of cross-cultural comparison, addressing some of the key issues that related to the notion of "the people" in the variant of each civilization. In this vein of inquiry, the book raises a set of questions: the positional question of who "the people" were, also in relation to other people; the participatory question of how groups of "the people" constituted themselves through patterns of belonging and exclusion, and how their status, or nonstatus, was charged with meaning; and the conversational question of how "the people" communicated about their group cohesion and negotiated the omnipresence of imbalances in, for instance, gender, social status, political entitlement, economic ability, or cultural expertise.[1]

The net of the investigation is cast widely, and this is done deliberately so. Cross-cultural comparison, with its delicate tension between generalization and specificity, invites a broad frame of reference. Comparative approaches rely on macrohistorical formations and paradigms as much as they are committed to the cultural particularities of the civilizations they juxtapose. There is no single response to the challenge of reconciliation between both vectors. Rather, the investigation is defined by what it seeks to avoid: if it gravitates too much toward the specifics of cultures, the comparison becomes treacherous. If there is too much generalization, the comparative approach is in danger of being meaningless.[2]

For instance, the differences in the political organization of Greece, Rome, and China are obvious. The stereotypically small Greek city-state had few commonalities with Rome's expanding republic and empire (although it is debated among historians just how similar both might have

been in their origins), and it shared even fewer features with the territorial empires of the Qin and Han. Once again, the different layers of historical development in each hemisphere add their own complexities to the comparison. Depending on the point in time, the organization of statehood and the surrounding interstate environment were vastly different, the closest moment of structural similarity – other than the high empires of Rome and Han – being the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, early Republican Rome, and the Classical Age of Greek history. In this sense, the quest for similar formations between Greece, Rome, and Han China that allows for comparative findings is confined to select periods in the history of each civilization.

But similarity is not the point, nor is synchronicity. In politics and society, no matter how the institutional setup and the size of the group, the configuration of "the people" is always shaped by the dichotomy between a relatively small, limited, yet not necessarily closed group of individuals on the one hand ("the rulers") and the vast amount of people who, by negative definition, are not part of this group on the other hand ("the ruled"). Ronald Syme has long proclaimed that "[i]n all ages, whatever the form and name of government, be it monarchy, republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the façade,"[3] which suggests a conceptual shift in the approaches to history and societies from specific forms of government to more general constellations of people. The observation merits careful reflection in more ways than one. For while Syme, the great historian of the Roman Empire, in his attempt to look behind this façade, had set out to disclose the forces of the Augustan revolution, his verdict traversed seamlessly from governmental paradigm to universal configuration: a configuration in which few wield power, mostly through the monopoly of different forms of capital that were characteristic of premodern elite rule – economic, cultural, symbolic (Pierre Bourdieu); and many who, by negative definition, had only limited or no access to these high-powered resources.

Just how this configuration between the many and the few was brought about and what its governing assumptions were, is conditioned by political culture. The Roman notion of *populus*, that of the Greek δῆμος, and that of Chinese *min*, differed in their political, juristic, and social capacities. A brief glance at the basic ideas behind each term makes this obvious.

The Roman concept of "the people" had a strong political connotation. The *populus* gathered in various assemblies to vote on politics and elect magistrates. The most eminent of these were the *comitia centuriata*, the centuriate assembly, and the *comitia tributa*, that of the *tribus*, the

constituting voting units of the Roman people. Both types of assembly were fueled by the idea of political entitlement. The common element was the shared identity of the people who attended as citizens and soldiers. From the mid-Republican period, the members of the centuriate assembly were grouped into separate property classes, which themselves were reflective of a citizen's economic ability to serve in a particular rank of the Roman army. Both the composition of the army and that of the centuriate assembly changed over time, as property qualifications were redefined and census levels were gradually lowered. In the tribute assembly similar changes were effected by shifting demographies and the redrawing of the boundaries of individual ridings.[4]

These developments have led scholars to stress the fact that, by the first century BCE, the actual body of participants in the Roman voting assemblies had been profoundly altered. In the late Republic, the urban *plebs*, the masses or commoners, dominated the voting assemblies as well as the informal *contiones*, gatherings that preceded the decision-making assemblies, which played a decisive role in the formation of public opinions. With these changes of the constituent groups of an assembly, both of speakers and audiences, the governing norms of the political discourse (public speech, civic rituals, performative acts) underwent a shift that was nothing short of revolutionary. When the "Roman Revolution" (Syme) actually was brought about, the political conversation among the Roman people was once again altered, and it was also relegated to different arenas of interaction, most prominently the circus and the games, with their quality to provide an all-new platform for the people's participation in the affairs of the state.[5]

All the while, the vibrant ideology that the *populus* was, and always had been, a privileged group of male and female citizens (*cives*, sing. *civis*) with a variety of political, economic, and legal privileges persisted well into the third century CE. The tag *res publica*, as "public affair" or, by extension, an "affair of the people," makes this obvious. In Latin, *populus* and *publicus* had the same etymological root. By the late Republic, when Rome dwindled in a series of civil wars, the rise of a group that labeled itself the so-called *populares* indicated that they, "the people's party," considered themselves as the true champions of the *populus*' role in the *res publica*, while their opponents were branded as *optimates*, "the best" – usually associated with a leading group of men who stood for the authority of the senate.[6]

The constellation between champions of the people and protagonists of the senate resonated in another formulaic expression that made the people even more poignant in Roman affairs, and it also hinted at the conceptual

complexities that revolved around their role: that is, the canonical term of *senatus populusque Romanus* (*SPQR*), "the Roman senate and people," or more freely, "the senate and people of Rome." The phrase appeared on inscriptions, coins, monuments, vexilloids, and in Roman literature; indeed, it was so prominent that in all likelihood it was the most widely used acronym in the premodern world. Despite its gripping character, its meaning is actually more convoluted. Referring to the government of both Republican and Imperial Rome, the initials list two entities of the Roman state, that of the senate and of the people. The emphasis here is on their combined appearance. For while the people were the ultimate source of all authority in the state, embodying its *auctoritas*, *maiestas*, and *dignitas*, and hence were the single sovereign, the senate lacked such quality. To be sure, senators were citizens and if asked whether they, as individuals, belonged to the *populus Romanus*, the answer would have been clear. The formula *SPQR*, with its explicit equation of two governmental bodies, thus emphatically acknowledged and, in turn, reinforced the senate's role in Rome, smoke-screening the fact that the *populus* alone was considered the ultimate source of sovereignty.[7]

Preoccupation with the citizenship paradigm should not lose the very many people out of sight who were not part of the privileged circle of *cives*, or who stood on the brink of the citizen body. The city of Rome had always been home to foreigners. Indeed, one of Rome's governing ideologies was that it was a champion of integrating others into its civic world. The idea was as old as that of Romulus' asylum and the legend of the rape of the Sabines; in both stories, Rome's future development was explained on the grounds that non-Romans made a critical contribution to the well-being of society. From the mid-Republic, the city included many foreigners – tradesmen, hostages, slaves – and the swiftly expanding imperium abroad further shaped multiple circles of identity and integration, at an almost dramatically accelerated speed. It is among the great historical fascinations of Rome that "Becoming Roman,"[8] and hence a member of the Roman people, was a common, aspirational goal of multiple cultures and ethnicities of the Mediterranean world who otherwise had very little in common with one another.[9]

The Greek concept of δῆμος was an even stronger manifestation of a highly politicized, and highly charged, approach. *Dēmos* or *damos* (people) appears as early as on Linear B inscriptions from the late Bronze Age (thirteenth century BCE). Along with the word *laos* (folk), it references the status group of people in a given place; it is difficult to assert where the lines of status were drawn and how. Unlike *laos*, *dēmos* evolved into a

political currency that became emblematic of Greek culture. When the saying of the "rule of the people," *dēmokratia*, first surfaced in the years after the Persian Wars, in the 470s BCE, it appears to have been used in a derogatory sense rather than in praise of the people's sovereignty. It was used first by those who considered themselves *kalokagathoi*, literally "the gentle and good," who were skeptical of such a rule of the *dēmos* rather than in favor of it. In the course of the fifth century BCE, the career of the word *dēmos* started from a negative concept, one that triggered associations of common people, have-nots, flotsam and jetsam, uneducated and hence unworthy of political participation, let alone rule. Much like the Latin word *plebs*, this semantic facet of *dēmos* never fully disappeared from the Greek mindset – in the later fourth century BCE, Aristotle despised the ruthless character of the *dēmos*. Meanwhile, the *dēmos'* changing role in the polis was set to change the course of Greek history.[10]

In Athens, the term *dēmos* first simply meant a local formation, a neighborhood of people and their settlement in the surrounding countryside. Under the reforms of Kleisthenes, in 509/8 BCE, these *dēmoi* were empowered to serve as enrollment units for Athenian citizens; henceforth, all citizens (*politai*) were required to be enlisted in a deme register, to have a track record of their status as citizens. This quantitative jump in the meaning of *dēmos*, from isolated neighborhood to a fixed number of *dēmoi* (presumably 139 under Kleisthenes) that covered the territory of Attica also facilitated a qualitative jump. For *dēmos* soon did not designate a merely local formation, that of a neighborhood or a subdivision of the countryside, but it became synonymous with the "the people" of Athens as such, and this meant the body of citizens.[11]

The citizens encompassed all members of the polis, rich and poor, male and female, those with political power and those without. According to a law from 451/0 BCE, introduced by the Athenian statesman Perikles, the birth criteria for citizenship were aggravated from one citizen parent to two, turning the body of citizens into both a more privileged and a more exclusive circle. Effectively, the legislative measure also enhanced the status of citizens as a group of male (and female) people who wielded full control over the affairs of their polis, in politics and beyond.[12] When the polis enacted measures such as these and issued decrees, it was customary that the public inscriptions started with the header "Resolved by the People and the Council" or sometimes simply "Resolved by the People," once again lending the *dēmos'* sanction and authority to the measure.

In light of this overwhelming dominance of the citizenship paradigm, the Greek city-state has variously been labeled a totalitarian state, most

notably by Jacob Burckhardt, to whom the full immersion of the citizen into the organization of the polis equaled nothing but servitude. Engaging as this may seem, it obviously overstates the case, also because the Greek city was an urban realm with a large array of people who were not citizens, free and unfree haves and have-nots, privileged and underprivileged. Even in Athens and its democracy, certain property qualifications applied that grouped the people into classes of entitlement, with the members of the lowest class, the so-called *thetes*, on the edge of society. True, they were citizens, but in reality the gap between them and the members of the higher-income classes was wide. In other poleis with an oligarchic consti-tution, have-nots easily dropped out of the privileged circle of citizens. They were part of the city, somewhere in the grey zone between *politai* and slaves, but their relation to the polis is largely unclear.[13]

Recent research has highlighted the degree to which foreigners, so-called *xenoi* and metics, impacted the public sphere of Athens, interactions in the marketplace and elsewhere in the city, and the process of shaping public opinion. Also, metics participated in some of the rituals and religious ceremonies in the city, although the character of this ritual inclusion is again debated among scholars.[14] Such factual diversity was one thing, the civic ideology of the *dēmos* another. As an exclusive group of citizens, the people of Athens, and of other Greek city-states, fostered a strong sense of superiority over others, fellow Hellenes and barbarians alike. In this sense, the mechanics of "othering" – the negative stereotyping of others in order to assert one's own social and cultural beliefs – have been identified as the governing principle of how Greek polis societies positioned themselves in a world that was swiftly changing around them.[15] When the Athenian *dēmos* gathered for the regular meetings of its assembly, the *ekklēsia*, the prevail-ing sense was one of entitlement. By the later fourth century BCE, this self-perception of the *dēmos* as ruler over all culminated in the bold statement that deified Demokratia, the goddess of democracy, herself crowned the *dēmos*, reinstating the idea that the people's suzerainty was sanctioned by the divine.[16]

The early Chinese world lacked a corresponding concept of citizenship. Instead, people were organized vertically in ever-shifting but finely cali-brated hierarchies, and horizontally in various kinship, occupational, or political groups that too evolved over time. The term *min* occurs fre-quently in texts of the Western Zhou period, where it designates the people as a group. The material well-being and contentedness of the people is presented as a factor of paramount importance to the political legitimacy of those who claimed to rule on Heaven's behalf. Commoners

in this period were attached to the royal or aristocratic households of the ruling elites as servile populations (designated by a variety of terms, including *shuren*), and lived in villages/settlements (*yi*) attached to the sometimes scattered domains of aristocrat families. Even though they remain largely invisible in the archaeological or textual record, we occasionally read in the bronze inscriptions of groups of people being included in royal grants to other aristocrats, or of land transfers between aristocratic lineages that included the people who cultivated the land. Whether, in any given location, kinship ties linked commoners and aristocrats remains an issue of contention.[17]

As the power of the Zhou royal house waned in the eighth century BCE, a new multistate order arose dominated by various ruling houses based in walled cities linked with one another through various mechanisms of interdependence. In sources covering the Spring and Autumn period, the people living within the walled cities (*guoren*) are opposed to those living in the surrounding countryside (*yeren*). The *guoren* – urban residents with ties to the nobility who performed military duties (also known as *shi* or "men-of-service") – were often courted by the major ruling and ministerial lineages, and our sources repeatedly indicate how the people (*ren*, but sometimes designated as *min*)[18] of such-and-such state acted as a group as they shaped decisions regarding war and peace and intervened in succession disputes. This has prompted some scholars to refer to this group as a citizenry. Agricultural workers, artisans, and merchants, whether they resided within a walled city or in the surrounding countryside, do not appear to have been counted among the *guoren*.[19]

Important social developments ensued when, by the Warring States period, power became consolidated in just a handful of large and powerful territorial states that had reorganized themselves to maximize their military reach. A strong dichotomy appeared between, on the one hand, the monarchs of the territorial states and their next-of-kin, and, on the other hand, a broad group of the ruled in which former distinctions between city and countryside were erased and in which the lower nobility became a professional class (still called *shi*) that more or less merged into the newly important class of commoners (*shuren*). These commoners, valued for what they contributed in terms of taxes, labor, or military service, entered into a direct relationship with the state, mediated by population registries and local agents of the state. They received surnames, land and dwellings, and access to new systems of social ranking (the so-called orders of merit), and, with that, the possibility of social mobility.[20] Despite the similarity to the Roman property classes, it is striking to see how these social and

political developments did not lead to the emergence of a joint citizen identity. Even though political thinkers of the fourth and third centuries BCE frequently note the importance of *shuren* or *min*, they did so, not because they thought they needed to be awarded a measure of political power but because, not unlike in the classics of the Western Zhou period, they saw caring for the people as an essential function of the ruler, who was now cast as a mother or father of the commoner populations.[21] Commoners did not actively contribute to political decision-making processes, their agency was entirely passive: their discontent and political commentary was to be voiced and channeled via popular ditties, more formal methods of remonstrance to the palace, and, in the worst case, rebellion.[22]

The symbiosis between commoner households, masters of relatively modest plots of land, and rulers continued unabated into the early imperial period (Qin and Western Han), even as the unification of 221 BCE had put a stop to the internecine warfare of the Warring States period.[23] The terminology kept evolving: *shuren*, by early Western Han, no longer referred to the free peasantry generally, but specifically to individuals freed from one or other servile status;[24] the term *min*, in Western Han sources, is contrasted both with unfree people and with imperial officials (*li*); *min* was also integrated into a new term that designated all registered commoners, whether rich or poor (*bianhu qimin*).[25] *Min* (as well as *li*) qualified for ranks of honor (*jue*); a divide existed between those of rank nine and up and those of rank one to eight, a divide that, roughly, separated the rulers from the ruled. At the same time, as the state retreated from its interventionist approach, especially after Emperor Wu's watershed reign, new social and economic forces were unleashed that would, by the first centuries CE, lead to the near-disappearance of the small, independent landholding families and a lesser role for the central court. As more and more free peasants became indebted and disappeared from the state's registries, land as well as power devolved to large landholding families, who, in the process, developed a powerful new elite ethos. Commoners, when they come through in historical sources of late Western Han or of Eastern Han, did so mostly as anonymous masses, in the thralls of new religious movements (e.g., the religious fervor for the Queen Mother of the West in the streets of Chang'an in 3 CE), as recipients of government support after natural disasters, or, when such support was not available, as rebels roving the countryside.[26]

Ancient approaches to "the people" in China and the ancient Mediterranean thus indicate some overlap, but they also bear witness to

deep cultural distinction. The present volume addresses these distinctions mostly before the backdrop of the aforementioned circles of identity and integration. Rather than conceiving of power relations within those circles as subject to the dynamics of politics alone, the subsequent studies explore exemplary fields of people interaction. The chapters are clustered in four thematic rubrics. In the first rubric, "Authority and Lifestyles of Distinction," Griet Vankeerberghen contrasts the defining social practices behind the assertion of aristocratic status. Her chapter, "Of Gold and Purple: Nobles in Western Han China and Republican Rome" (Chapter 1), analyzes the material and textual expressions of the ethos of, on the one hand, Roman nobles of the Republican period and, on the other, prominent noble families in China in the post–Emperor Wu period. She shows remarkable similarities in the ways both groups of nobles expressed their status through genealogical activity, the layout of their dead in family cemeteries, and the celebration of the virtues of founding members of the family. At the same time, the chapter lays bare the differences in the historical trajectory that led to the prominence of noble families in Republican Rome and in mid-Western Han China, and explains the different roles both groups of nobles assumed as leaders within the sociopolitical order of their respective societies. The chapter shows how both groups of nobles were driven in their social and cultural expression by uncertainty and competition, as such peer competition forced noble families both in Rome and China to stress the exceptional quality of their family over many generations. Cultural orientations in both Rome and China that emphasized historical communication with the past thus facilitated an authoritative display of family success.

Miranda Brown and Zhongwei Zhang's chapter, "A Tale of Two Stones: Social Memory in Roman Greece and Han China" (Chapter 2), discloses the stunning similarities between the inscriptions accompanying Hellenistic honorary statues and those found on Han stelae. Not only did the authors of both kinds of inscriptions offer stylized and idealized portrayals of their subjects, but they also made recourse to similar rhetorical strategies. Their eulogism not only praised the honorands for their glorious descent and illustrious careers, but detailed the honorand's track record of service to the people. Through an interrogation of the whos, whens, wheres, whys, and hows of both kinds of monuments, the chapter illuminates the dissimilar political and social circumstances responsible for producing social memory in the Hellenistic and Han worlds. In the Hellenistic realm, social memory was largely the artifact of the polis and its people. As such, honorary statues testify to the resilience and tenacity of

polis citizenship in periods of foreign, imperial occupation. In the Han world, in contrast, social memory was the product of transregional networks that sprung up around important official clans during periods of political instability. Such networks furthermore bore witness to the enduring pull of the imperial capital for local notables, even in an era of factionalism.

Focusing on the urban middle stratum in the Han and Roman empires (artisans, craftsmen, shopkeepers, merchants, etc.), Carlos F. Noreña compares these groups' incentives and opportunities for assuming corporate identities, for engaging in different forms of collective action in the public sphere, and for participating in associative life more generally. His chapter on "Private Associations and Urban Experience in the Han and Roman Empires" (Chapter 3) argues that different strategies of imperial rule, different mechanisms of social control, and different configurations of state power shaped the nature of urban experience in these two ancient world empires. In considering the statecraft of the Han and Roman empires in comparative perspective, what emerges as a key variable is the nature of the relationship between the central regime and local elites. In the case of the Han empire, this relationship was highly asymmetrical, as the central state effectively suppressed the ambitions and upward mobility of potentially disruptive local agents, especially the merchants. As a result, social power was concentrated at the top and at the center. The distribution of social power in the Roman world, by contrast, was more balanced and evenly distributed across space, as the central state worked together with local elites in the running of the empire, resulting in an empire-wide network of power and authority concentrated in cities. For the citizens and commoners of the two empires, this dichotomy resulted in two very different frameworks for undertaking collective action in the public sphere, which helps to explain the omnipresence of associations in the Roman empire, and their virtual absence in the Han empire.

The chapters of the second cluster look at "The People as Agents and Addressees." Francisco Pina Polo, in "Rhetoric, Oratory and People in Ancient Rome and Early China" (Chapter 4), compares the relevance of rhetoric and public oratory before the people in ancient Rome and early imperial China. In Republican Rome, public oratory always played a central role in politics. However, speaking before the people was never the right of every citizen. In practice, speaking in public was reserved for the social elite, and this entailed effective control of most of the political information in the community. In early imperial China, where the emperor remained invisible and distant for his subjects, concepts like a