

The Politics of Death: An Examination of Aristocratic Male Funerals During the Late Republic of Rome

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The Roman Republic during the first century BC was marked by multiple periods of instability and political chaos, as well as numerous civil wars, which together brought about a major shift in the traditional sources for political support in the Roman world. The military, traditionally "the defender of state and architect of empire," was no longer the exclusive institution of the landed Roman citizen, but now incorporated poorer classes who were inspired by the opportunities a military career offered in regards to personal gain and wealth.^[1] Significant military reforms, beginning with the consulship of Gaius Marius, created the context for unprecedented concentrations of military power within select individuals, heretofore unheard of, as well as militarily elected and enforced political offices within Rome.^[2] The system of individual competition, inherent in Roman politics and public life, had always begrudgingly accepted the importance of gaining and maintaining the support of the people, who were defined as "the arbiters of success or failure [as] they alone could validate structural change."^[3] However, due to the structural upheaval which marked the late Republic, the role of this mass became increasingly more important and central in the political theatre of Rome.

Within the chaos of this period, it is no surprise that public events were co-opted as political tools, particularly the funerals of elite Roman citizens. Funerals became intensely public and political events which, at times, resulted in the outbreak of lethal violence and rioting due to the calculated actions of politicians and their supporters. The increased political weight of the Roman proletariat, and by extension the transformation of the traditional systems for political support, is made clear in examining the significant changes which occurred in Roman funerary customs during the late Republic.

The funerary customs and rituals of the Roman world performed two necessary functions. The first was the practical necessity of disposing of the body. The XII Tables had forbidden inhumation or cremation to take place within city limits, a law which was still in effect in 44 BC when the Charter of the Colonia Genetiva introduced a slight addendum to also ban building monuments to the dead within city limits.^[4] With some exceptions to this law, the body was taken outside of city limits.^[5] Although both inhumation and cremation were accepted practices, the minimum requirement to fulfil the expectation for burial was the "sprinkling of three handfuls of dirt" over the body.^[6] Ignoring this expectation of proper treatment resulted in negative repercussions for the deceased, and could have some effect on the living as well.^[7]

Although these repercussions were believed to exist, they did not always apply: prohibitions against proper burial procedures are recorded in both Appian^[8] and Plutarch^[9] concerning the treatment of Tiberius Gracchus' body and three thousand of his followers in 121 BC. Even if the Senate did not pass prohibitions forbidding proper burial, the minimum requirements for burial did not always occur, particularly among the poor of the city, and a distinction is made between the *corpora*, those who were destined for proper burial, and the *cadavera*, those who would become abandoned flesh and food for the dogs of the city.^[10]

A secondary function of the funeral, which should be considered the most important element, was the display of power and prestige. It was "the last public performance for an aristocrat whose career was built on such performances."^[11] Polybius, in his account of the funerary process, described the traditional funeral of office-holders and other illustrious men as a glorious spectacle which immortalized the noble deeds of the deceased and made them known, but also ensured they would be known in the future as well.^[12] The proper observance of this ceremony had specific events guaranteeing this was made possible, notably through the *pompa funebris* and the *laudatio*, the funeral procession and oration. The procession began at the house of the deceased and wound its way through the streets of the city towards the rostra in the Forum where the funeral oration would be given, and finally ended outside the city walls where the body would be disposed of through cremation or inhumation.^[13] The *pompa funebris* during the mid-Republic acted as a means of gathering participants who would later become the audience for the funeral oration, and as a means of displaying the *imagines* and the deceased's popularity.^[14] Although it is not known if there was a customary route for the processions to the Forum, a longer route would have resulted in greater numbers and therefore the largest possible audience for the *laudatio*, a chief concern for this event.^[15] The procession would bring the "body with all its paraphernalia" to the rostra in the Forum and would either be "propped upright upon it so as to be conspicuous, or, more rarely, laid upon it."^[16] The body, transported on a bier, was accompanied by musicians, dancers, actors wearing the *imagines*, professional mourners, friends, and relatives, which all together created a theatrical and carnivalesque atmosphere.^[17]

The *imagines*, or ancestor masks, were a distinct and core element of the funeral ritual for wealthy and politically important Roman citizens, their primary function being their display during "the funeral procession of a Roman office-holder."^[18] After this procession had made its way to the rostra and arranged the deceased on the platform, the audience would have looked up to see the famous men of Rome's history seated among the statues that crowded the platform framed with the monumental backdrop of the Curia Hostilia before its destruction.^[19] The *imagines* evoked "a familiar and expected picture of the Roman past," confirming and reminding the viewer of what they already knew.^[20] Their function was to mark a history of merit and service by a Roman family through instances of attaining senior magistracies, and as such advertised the family's fulfilment of duty and their active role in the maintenance of the State.^[21] Just as the *imagines* provoked feelings of awe and memories of a shared history, they "could even become an embarrassment" if new offices were not won by subsequent generations within this family.^[22] Although their role in the context of funeral ceremonies was integral within the city limits of Rome, there is no evidence they were displayed in this same manner during funeral processions and orations held outside of the capital.^[23] The *imagines* held a wealth of meaning

and significance that would have been readily understood by the audience at the funeral, and this tacit knowledge therefore created a platform for the "exaltation of the nation's unity in the persons of its great men."[\[24\]](#)

Once the procession arrived at the Forum and arranged the deceased in view of the crowd, the eulogy would be delivered by

his son, if he ha[d] left one of full age...failing him, one of his relations, [would] mount the Rostra and deliver a speech concerning the virtues of the deceased, and the successful exploits performed by him in his lifetime [\[25\]](#)

Like the display of the *imagines*, the *laudatio funebris* was another means of "self-advertisement and influence" for the deceased's family on behalf of the dead.[\[26\]](#) The eulogy functioned to connect the recently deceased, through the exploits of his ancestors, with Rome's illustrious history. The *imagines* worn by family members or actors representing the deceased's ancestors would have been highly visible to the crowd as they sat on ivory curule chairs arranged behind the orator as he gave his speech, and would have brought the events of the past to the present.[\[27\]](#) Not only did the *laudatio* celebrate and demonstrate a life well spent as a servant to the State, but the eulogy also "enumerated the offices and achievements of each ancestor, starting with the oldest."[\[28\]](#) The importance of being able to display a lineage littered with esteemed figures was not just a tool of a political family. As seen in Livy's Roman history, the State itself boasted a lineage of historical and mythological characters in order to legitimize its position and dominance.[\[29\]](#) Anchises, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, names Romans of the past and future as they march past Aeneas as if in a funeral procession during his brief visit to the underworld.[\[30\]](#)

The funeral ceremonies of eminent Romans, as Polybius described, were at least at one point a true celebration and advertisement of the "nation's unity in the persons of its great men."[\[31\]](#) These funerals were not void of politics or propaganda; however, the extent to which an individual or a single family could exploit these opportunities for self-advertisement during the mid-Republic was somewhat constrained, as this self-promotion was framed through a connection to the State and could not survive on the merit of the individual alone. However, with the emergence of "parallel or alternative forms of civil life...outside the traditional domain," public events became increasingly more important as a political tool.[\[32\]](#) With the intense factionalism in the late Republic between the Optimates and Populares, the already political nature of an elite funeral correspondingly intensified and played a major role in this "struggle within the nobility."[\[33\]](#) The funerals of elite Romans held during the final years of the Republic, specifically the funerals of Sulla, Clodius Pulcher, and Julius Caesar ranging from 78 BC to 44 BC, reflect this transformation of a public event into an "alternative institution" of political support.[\[34\]](#)

At the time of Sulla's death in 78 BC, violence had long been recognized as a "political weapon...a necessary sanction, should law and its associated physical power prove inadequate."[\[35\]](#) Unlike the funerals of Clodius and Caesar, the presence of Sulla's military ensured violence did not erupt: "Those

who had served as soldiers under his command hurried under arms from every side to join the procession, and each as he arrived immediately assumed his place in military formation."^[36] Although the political strain between the anti- and pro-Sullan factions was felt when "dissension sprang up in the city over his remains," the implied threat from a still loyal Sullan army during the procession ensured all were kept in check.^[37] The presence of the military "was designed to recall the origin of his power," just as the procession of the *imagines* and the *laudatio* of earlier public funerals reminded the audience of the deceased's own rise to political prominence.^[38]

The potential political opportunity a public funeral afforded was not only open to the deceased's family, but also unrelated politicians. Lutatius, Consul at the time of Sulla's death, "staged the first attested funeral to be held at public expense by decree of the senate" and very clearly chose to honour Sulla with such a display in order to serve "his own political agenda" as he supported Sulla's politics.^[39] As the eulogy was traditionally given by the son of the deceased, it also functioned as his formal entry into the public world of Roman politics. Regardless of this traditional function, Sulla's son Faustus was not granted this customary right of address, as he was deemed too young, and therefore politically powerless. The honour of addressing the "huge crowd of ordinary folk...such as had never been seen at any previous event" was instead granted to established politicians and orators of the day—individuals who recognized the political opportunity of the moment and were able to exploit such an event for the benefit of the pro-Sullan faction.^[40] What was said is not necessarily of the utmost significance: it is the change in the traditional process of the funeral that is important. The manipulation of traditional elements of the aristocratic funeral were not localized to the procession or eulogy, but the event as a whole. The suspension of a "sumptuary law that [Sulla] himself had passed" resulted in a funeral which resembled a military triumph more than anything else.^[41]

During the funeral of Clodius Pulcher in 52 BC, the crowd became an extremely active participant due to the urging of four individuals with aims of bringing about a dictatorship for Pompey.^[42] According to Appian, a crowd of those who were supporters of Clodius brought his body

into the senate-house, either to do him honour...or to reproach the senate for their failure to act. The more reckless of the crowd heaped up the benches and ceremonial seats of the senators to make him a funeral pyre, and its flames consumed not only Clodius but also the senate-house.^[43]

None of the traditional elements of a funeral were observed, and the event became what Sumi calls "a 'plebeian' funeral ritual."^[44] Repeated by Antony roughly a decade later, Clodius' wife Fulvia "incited the crowd to even greater sympathy and anger by displaying Clodius' naked corpse, wounds and all."^[45] As Asconius records, following the destruction of the senate-house, Clodius' supporters and allies attempted to seek revenge against his murderer by attacking the house of Milo.^[46] Fulvia, Sex. Clodius, Plancus, and Rufus seized upon Clodius' death in an attempt to simultaneously undermine a political opponent, Milo, while strengthening their own political positions as supporters of Pompey. The circumstances of Clodius' murder granted Fulvia and the others the opportunity to manipulate the audience of his would-be funeral into action against a strong political opponent. Clodius' followers were recognized as a political body capable of promoting political change through violent action, although not necessarily the political outcome of their own design.

Perhaps the most significant *laudatio*, in terms of the obvious and instant political advantage which this address afforded, was delivered by Marc Antony during Caesar's funeral in 44 BC.^[47] According to Suetonius, an actor impersonating Caesar during the funeral procession incited the crowd on the orders of Antony, who was then able to further manipulate the crowd through his own performance.^[48] Not only was Antony an actor in the drama of the funeral, he was also the "*choregos*" of the entire event: "he lead them in their laments of Caesar and succeeded in presenting the loss as theirs in a special way."^[49] In the absence of Octavian, Caesar's adopted heir, Antony attempted to use the opportunity presented by a public funeral to promote his own claim as Caesar's successor.^[50] The already strained emotions of the public, due to the nature of Caesar's death and the uncertainty that it brought, were further pushed towards violence by Antony's manipulations. In displaying Caesar's body, complete with stab wounds and bloodstained clothes, Antony ensured his audience would be provoked to a level of violent action against Caesar's murderers, which in turn brought about further riots and hostilities throughout the city.^[51] The traditional Roman funeral, conceived as "a private ritual performed by the family which celebrated the glory achieved by a particular *gens*," had become an event where the public was no longer the isolated audience meant to observe and learn, but a recognized and necessary participant in the action of a political drama.^[52]

As Polybius described, funerals of elite and important Roman citizens were politically charged events and the opportunity for exploitation was not unknown to the aristocratic families of the mid-Republic. However, the political organization of the Republic which Polybius experienced was not yet capable of supporting, let alone creating, the political figures which marked the late Republic. The gradual reformations to this structure resulted in the absorption of the wealthier plebeians into an expanded governing aristocracy who, at the expense of their former companions, continued to support the traditionally aristocratic candidates, introducing a growing population of disenfranchised people in the city of Rome.^[53] The political potential of funerals, during the middle Republic, was contained by a structure which still required prominent men to follow the traditional means for creating a political career. The introduction of alternative institutions in Rome, which allowed for a re-imagining of these traditional sources of support, combined with a heightened self-awareness of this underrepresented mass, changed the political nature of the Republic. The public funerals of important families, already manipulated as a tool for the promotion of the State, became a natural space for the newly accepted self-advertisement now supported and acknowledged as legitimate during the final years of the Republic.

^[1] Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 366.

^[2] Fergus Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 1998), 2.

^[3] Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic*, 95.

- [4] Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 129.
- [5] Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 129.
- [6] Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome*, 129.
- [7] Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, 43.
- [8] Appian, *The Civil Wars*, Bk.1:16.
- [9] Plutarch, *Roman Lives: Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus*: 20.
- [10] John Bodel, "Dealing with the Dead: Undertakers, Executioners and Potter's fields in Ancient Rome," in *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*, ed. Valerie M. Hope and Eireann Marshall (New York: Routledge, 2000), 128-151.
- [11] Geoffrey S. Sumi, "Power and Ritual: The Crowd at Clodius' Funeral," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 46:1 (1997): 80. Academic Search Premier, JSTOR (accessed 25 October 2011).
- [12] Perseus Digital Library at Tufts, "Polyb.6.54: The Glorious Memory of Brave Men Kept Alive," <http://perseus.uchicago.edu/perseuscgi/citequery3.pl?dbname=GreekTexts&getid=1&query=Polyb.%206.54>. (accessed 16 November 2011)
- [13] Ibid.
- [14] Diane Favro and Christopher Johanson, "Death in Motion: Funeral Processions in the Roman Forum," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 69.1 (March 2010): 17.
- [15] Ibid.
- [16] Perseus Digital Library at Tufts, "Polyb.6.54."
- [17] Harriet I. Flower, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 92.
- [18] Ibid., 91.
- [19] Favro and Johanson, *Death in Motion*, 23.
- [20] Flower, *Ancestor Masks*, 11.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] Ibid., 10
- [23] John Bodel, "Punishing Piso," *The American Journal of Philology* 120.1(Spring 1999): 50.
- [24] C. Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980): 347.
- [25] Perseus Digital Library at Tufts, "Polyb.6.53"
- [26] Flower, *Ancestor Masks*, 128.
- [27] Favro and Johanson, *Death in Motion*, 22.

- [28] Flower, *Ancestor Masks*, 130.
- [29] Livy, *The Rise of Rome*, ed. and trans. T.J. Luce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Bk.I:1-5.
- [30] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, ed. and trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), Bk.6: 875-1030.
- [31] Nicolet, *World of the Citizen*, 347.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 345.
- [33] Brendan J. Lutz and James M. Lutz, "Political Violence in the Republic of Rome: Nothing New Under the Sun," *Government and Opposition* 41:4 (2006): 497.
- [34] Nicolet, *World of the Citizen*, 345.
- [35] A.W. Lintott, *Political violence in Republican Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968):175.
- [36] Appian, *Civil Wars*, Bk.I: 105-106.
- [37] *Ibid.*
- [38] Nicolet, *World of the Citizen*, 349.
- [39] Flower, *Ancestor Masks*, 123.
- [40] *Ibid.*
- [41] H. H. Scullard, *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981): 221.
- [42] Sumi, "Power and Ritual": 92.
- [43] Appian, *The Civil Wars*, Bk.II: 21.
- [44] Sumi, "Power and Ritual": 102.
- [45] *Ibid.*, 84.
- [46] As cited by Nicolet, *World of the Citizen*, 350.
- [47] Plutarch, *Roman Lives*, Antony: 14-15; Appian, *Civil Wars*, Bk.III: 2-7.
- [48] Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, ed. and trans. Robert Graves (New York: Penguin Group, 1957): Divus Julius: 84.
- [49] Flower, *Ancestor Masks*, 125.
- [50] *Ibid.*
- [51] Sumi, "Power and Ritual": 83.
- [52] *Ibid.*, 80.
- [53] Lutz and Lutz, "Political Violence," 497.

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