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MICHAEL PEACHIN

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CONTENTS

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Contributors xi

Abbreviations xiii

PART I. PREFATORY MATERIAL

1. Introduction 3
Michael Peachin
2. From Republic to Empire 37
Clifford Ando

PART II. MECHANISMS OF SOCIALIZATION

3. Making Romans in the Family 69
Josiah Osgood
4. Primary Education 84
Marietta Horster
5. Rhetorical Education 101
Joy Connolly
6. Philosophy as Socio-political Upbringing 119
Johannes Hahn
7. Law and Social Formation in the Roman Empire 144
Dennis P. Kehoe

PART III. MECHANISMS OF COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION

8. Literature and Communication 167
Charles W. Hedrick, Jr.

9. Epigraphy and Communication 191
Elizabeth A. Meyer
10. Communicating with Tablets and Papyri 227
Andrea Jördens
11. Coins and Communication 248
Carlos F. Noreña

PART IV. COMMUNAL CONTEXTS FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION

12. Elite Self-Representation in Rome 271
Harriet I. Flower
13. Public Speaking in Rome: A Question of *Auctoritas* 286
Francisco Pina Polo
14. The Second Sophistic 304
Thomas A. Schmitz
15. Roman Society in the Courtroom 317
Leanne Bablitz
16. Public Entertainments 335
Kathleen M. Coleman
17. Socializing at the Baths 358
Garrett G. Fagan

PART V. MODES OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

18. Roman Honor 377
J. E. Lendon
19. Friendship among the Romans 404
Koenraad Verboven
20. Hospitality among the Romans 422
John Nicols

21. Roman Dining 438
Katherine M. D. Dunbabin and William J. Slater
22. Violence in Roman Social Relations 467
Garrett G. Fagan

PART VI. SOCIETIES WITHIN THE ROMAN COMMUNITY

23. Organized Societies: *Collegia* 499
Jonathan S. Perry
24. The Roman Army 516
David Potter
25. Graeco-Roman Cultic Societies 535
John Scheid
26. Ancient Jewish Social Relations 548
Seth Schwartz
27. Christian Society 567
Adam H. Becker

PART VII. MARGINALIZED PERSONS

28. Slaves in Roman Society 589
Leonhard Schumacher
29. Women in Roman Society 609
Kristina Milnor
30. Children in the Roman Family and Beyond 623
Jens-Uwe Krause
31. Roman Prostitutes and Marginalization 643
Thomas A. J. McGinn
32. Between Marginality and Celebrity: Entertainers
and Entertainments in Roman Society 660
Hartmut Leppin

33. Magicians and Astrologers 679
J. B. Rives
34. The Roman Bandit (*Latro*) as Criminal and Outsider 693
Werner Riess
35. Physically Deformed and Disabled People 715
Johannes Stahl
- Index 735

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CHAPTER 13

PUBLIC SPEAKING IN ROME: A QUESTION OF *AUCTORITAS*

FRANCISCO PINA POLO

INTRODUCTION: THE *CONTIO* AS VENUE FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION WITH THE PEOPLE

IN republican Rome, the *contio* (a rough equivalent of the modern American town hall meeting) was the only institutionalized venue in which an orator might directly address the public as his primary audience. Whereas the *comitia* (the popular voting assemblies) were convened to undertake deliberations that would ultimately result in a vote on a given set of matters at hand, the *contio* was by definition a gathering that could come to no such conclusion; indeed, those who attended were organized neither by tribe nor century, as was the case in the popular voting assemblies (Gel. 13. 16. 3). On the other hand, since the *contio* was an officially sanctioned meeting of the people, it could be convened only by a magistrate (though not by a promagistrate), or by a tribune of the plebs.¹ The individual who summoned such a meeting of the people then presided, and was expected to address those assembled—he possessed the so-called *potestas contionandi* (the power to convene a *contio* along with the right to speak there). He also had the power to turn the platform over to other individuals,

1. One source (Fest. p. 38L) includes priests as having possessed the power to convene *contiones*; however, such a prerogative is otherwise unattested for them, and seems improbable.

if he so chose (*contionem dare*), and he could likewise summon individuals chosen by him, either private persons or magistrates, to address the assembly (*producere in contionem*). The convener furthermore decided the order of speakers, along with the amount of time allotted to each person who would address the meeting.

In the republican period, such *contiones* were held quite frequently—indeed, even more assiduously than the popular voting assemblies—and they were convened for various purposes. Thus, for example, a proposed law had initially to be debated for a period of three market days (i.e., at least two weeks) in the context of such *contiones*. The proposer of the legislation in question, those who desired to support it, as well as any who were opposed, were expected to attend these deliberatory meetings. Before the creation of the several standing courts in the late republic, any trial before the people (*iudicium populi*) was also conducted in the context of a *contio*. In such a case, the arguments for prosecution and defense took the form of a public debate, after which the presiding magistrate would convoke the popular voting assembly, where a verdict would ultimately be rendered. Aside from these kinds of meeting, which were preparatory to a full convocation of the popular voting assembly, there were also any number of *contiones* held over the course of a given year, whose only purpose was to inform the populace regarding various matters of communal importance. At such gatherings the edicts of magistrates or decrees of the senate, for example, were read aloud to the public. Military victories, and defeats, were likewise announced to the people in *contiones*; it was here that victorious generals, after their triumphs, told of their great deeds on the field of battle. Here, too, were recited eulogies for the community's most eminent men. It was at *contiones* that magistrates were sworn into office, and gave a reckoning of service upon laying down an official post. In short, the *contio* was probably the Roman community's most important venue for the transaction of official business of all kinds, and for the transmission of important news concerning the *res publica* (the body politic).

The most important of these meetings were those involving politics. Given that this was the only venue in which an officially sanctioned contact could be established between individuals who desired a political career and the mass of the people, these meetings quickly became the principal instrument of self-representation for those who desired to embark on the *cursus honorum* (the series of state offices that constituted a political career). Matters of immediate public consequence could be raised in these *contiones*, and it was here that political campaigns were carried on. In this context, an individual might flaunt his own positions, and attack those of his enemies.

In short, the *contiones* were an absolutely central element of Roman political life—as the chief medium available to individuals for acquiring popularity, but also as the main point of contact between the senate (and senators) and the people, this contact mediated by the oratory of magistrates. Thus, the *contio* served as a conduit of communal information, and as the principal locus of official public debate; and in Rome's 'face-to-face' society, most of the acts that would affect communal life were discussed before the people. However, were these matters considered with the people's input, or with the populace functioning more as an audience?

In 138 BC the Roman state faced a significant increase in the price of grain. Curiatius, who was then tribune of the plebs, brought the consuls Brutus and Scipio Nasica before a *contio*, where he hoped to force them to agree to propose to the senate that a quantity of wheat should be purchased and made available by the state, to regulate the price of this basic commodity (V. Max. 3. 7. 3). When Nasica began to offer his arguments against the tribune's plan, the crowd brought him up short with its shouts. Nasica pleaded with the people for quiet, arguing that he knew better than they what was in the interest of the community. According to our source for this series of events, Valerius Maximus, this stopped the people in their tracks. They quickly became respectfully silent, since they accorded much more weight to the *auctoritas* (the political clout) of the orator than they did to the grain problem at hand.

Valerius Maximus also relates how Carbo, another tribune of the plebs, caused Scipio Aemilianus, just after the latter's victory over Numantia in Hispania, to ascend the orator's tribunal (V. Max. 6. 2. 3). Carbo then asked Scipio what his opinion was with respect to the recent death of Scipio's brother-in-law, Tiberius Gracchus. Carbo was obviously hoping to force Scipio, in a public forum, to condemn the murder of Gracchus. Nonetheless, Scipio responded that Gracchus had been killed justifiably. Those present at the assembly exploded in protest, to which the orator reacted in a cutting fashion: "You keep quiet, you to whom Italy is a step-mother." The crowd was immediately silenced, though not because of any fear instilled in them by the great man; rather, we are told that they felt acutely the deep respect that Scipio and his ancestors had waked in them.

The attitudes toward the people demonstrated by these two Scipios are exceptional in their publicly displayed lack of respect; nevertheless, they encapsulate an entire ideology held deeply by the Roman republican aristocracy. An orator presenting an argument to the people was of course expected to select those points he considered most persuasive. Yet, along with the actual arguments, indeed, even above and beyond them, there was deployed a more essential thing: the *auctoritas* of the man speaking, in other words, his reliability and capacity to lead, given the fact that he was a member of Rome's social elite. For this reason, one was not seeking, in the context of a *contio*, a true consensus based on a real debate with the populace. Rather, one expected the people to accept the judgment of those who claimed to be its betters. Such acceptance, of course, did not always come easy, and confrontation was occasionally the order of the day. Still, on the whole, the people were very largely excluded from intervening in the actual ordering of the *res publica*.

The logical consequence was that not everyone at Rome had free access to making a speech before the public. Instead, the magistrate in charge of a given assembly had the exclusive right to decide who might speak there. Addressing the public in such a context, then, was the prerogative of a magistrate, and did not constitute one of the rights of citizens generally. In theory, no Roman, whatever his social status, was excluded from addressing a gathering of the citizenry. But the actuality presented us by the available sources, with very few exceptions, shows that during the period of the republic, those who addressed the public were members of the social

elite, generally acting magistrates, otherwise ex-magistrates; and many of these were men who had been consul. Thus, nearly every man known to have addressed a gathering of the Roman people was a senator, and as such, each of these men was endowed with the *auctoritas* that membership in the senatorial order entailed. The right to deliver a speech from the tribunal thus derived largely from the *potestas* (official authority) with which the orator (as acting magistrate) was invested, or from the level of *auctoritas* generally recognized to accrue to the individual in question. And so, at a *contio*, just as in the senate, the right to speak was doled out in close accord with the hierarchies that characterized Roman society generally. And this meant, in turn, that the effectiveness of an orator depended heavily on his social status, and on the civil and military (and also religious) offices and accomplishments to which he could lay claim. To put the matter plainly: in republican Rome, some citizens were more highly regarded, because of the qualifications just mentioned, than others, and the weight of the spoken word in a public political setting was tied intimately to the status of the person who uttered it.

It is thus precisely to the *auctoritas* that emanated from the orator's tribunal that Cicero referred, when he wanted to justify the fact that during the first twenty years of his own political career, he had intervened in not a single *contio*. At the start of his defense of the Manilian law in 66 BC, Cicero (who was then praetor) defined the orator's tribunal as "the most important place for the conduct of public business, the most distinguished place for public speaking." He went on to say that he had previously not dared to address the public from that platform because his personal *auctoritas* had not yet reached the level appropriate to that venue: "Previously, on account of my age, I did not dare aspire to such a place of authority, and I had determined to appear there only when my talents were perfected." (Cic. *Man.* 1)

The society of the Roman Republic was one in which oral, as opposed to written, communication performed a centrally important function, and *contiones* were absolutely fundamental to this orally communicative world. However, the limitations placed by Rome's aristocratically oriented political regime on speaking in public resulted in public political communications following a one-way street, namely, from the elite down to the rest of the population. Those who attended a *contio* had the right to be informed about the details of a projected piece of legislation, or regarding important news that affected the community, or the opinions of the great men on some matter of pressing importance. The people could expect often to witness a regular oratorical duel between members of the elite; however, the understood rules of the game left no space for active interventions by the people in these debates. Political discussion took place, then, in full view of the people, yet without their active participation. There simply existed no regulated mechanism for the public to make its opinion known in a *contio*, even though that public could indicate its will by applause, silence, shouting and the like, just as it might in other venues, for example, the theater.

This lack of institutionalized conduits for the people to make its will known forced the populace to turn to exceptional measures, to reach the leaders of the

society.² The result was that more violent actions, of one kind and another, ultimately became the only method available to the people for demonstrations of political desires. This clearly added to the generally high level of violence present in Roman republican society (on which, see Fagan in this volume). Again, all of this was played out in the *contiones*, which became, especially in the late republic, important instruments for mobilizing the urban *plebs*. Thus, the *contio* came to be associated with the rabble rousers (*seditioni*), who in this later period were perceived as endangering the very existence of the Roman state.

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF PUBLIC ORATORY

The combination of qualities such as *potestas*, *dignitas*, and, in the end, *auctoritas*, which orators were expected to possess, was reflected in the very topography of oratory before the people. There were several places where *contiones* were most usually held. At times, the spaces that fronted on certain temples—that of Castor in the Forum, of Jupiter on the Capitoline, or of the goddess Bellona in the Campus Martius—were engaged for this purpose. We also hear of *contiones* put on in the Circus Flaminius. This particular spot was especially useful, since it lay outside the sacred boundary of the city. Thus, persons who were functioning as magistrates with *imperium* (the legal right to command troops), and who could therefore not legally enter the city, or those who were awaiting a triumph and were likewise forbidden to enter the city limits, could attend public meetings there. The legislative *contiones*, held just before a vote was to be taken on a matter of public business in the *comitia centuriata*, were, like the popular voting assembly itself, convened in the Campus Martius, again, just beyond the sacred city limits.

Still, all of these locales were exceptional, given that the typical place from which an orator addressed the public was the Rostra, in the Forum Romanum. The name of this monument derived from the ship beaks, captured in the battle at Antium in 338 BC by Caius Maenius, who then had these trophies affixed to the front of the platform. This was just one of various physical transformations that the speaker's platform experienced over the course of time. But be that as it may, the Rostra stood on the same spot for its entire republican history; it separated the Comitium from the Forum, and faced the senate house, thus serving as a kind of physically symbolic meeting point between the senators and the rest of the populace. In 44 BC, however, Caesar had a new tribunal constructed at the far western end of the Forum; this was soon thereafter rebuilt and expanded by Augustus. It was from this stage, or from the *rostra* attached to the temple of the Divine Julius Caesar, that orators of

2. Cicero, for example, considered it seditious for orators to ask specific questions of those attending a *contio*, something that appears to have happened only exceptionally anyhow. See Cic. *Sest.* 126, Q. fr. 2. 3. 2.

the imperial period would address the public. In any case, until the middle of the second century BC, the orators had faced their audiences in the Comitium, thus speaking in the direction of the senate house. From that point on, they would speak facing the Forum, a much larger space. The public, in both instances, remained standing, a circumstance considered most propitious by Cicero, who thought that the Greek custom of sitting in theaters for assembly meetings led only to the taking of bad decisions (Cic. *Flac.* 16; *Agr.* 2. 13).

Whatever the locale chosen for a given *contio*, though, the disposition of orator to public was always the same. The man speaking always stood above his audience, pronouncing his words from 'a higher place,' whether this was the podium of a temple, or the speaker's tribunal.³ This up-down physical arrangement in the *contio* represented the type of communication desired in those gatherings; it symbolized the moral and political authority of the aristocracy, and it helped to reaffirm hierarchically the validity of the oration held. The importance of all this is captured in an episode narrated by Cicero. In 62 BC, Caesar was presiding over a *contio*, which he, in his capacity as praetor, had called. He refused to authorize Catulus, at that moment a man of consular rank (and thus, in terms of the *cursus honorum*, his superior), to take the speaker's platform. Caesar ultimately did not stop his opponent from speaking, but was able to force him to talk from a physically less elevated position (*ex inferiore loco*) (Cic. *Att.* 2. 24. 3). Caesar's action was a public declaration of his disdain for Catulus and, at the same time, was a method of robbing his opponent's address of its strength, regardless of what the actual arguments may have been.

The *auctoritas* of the orator's tribunal was intensified by the fact that the structure itself had the status of a sacred space (*templum*).⁴ This was a consecrated place—like, in fact, the podiums of temples, from which *contiones* could also be directed, and also like the senate house, which watched over, in a sense, the speaker's platform (cf. Cic. *Flac.* 57). This sacral character served symbolically to reaffirm the authority of those who spoke from this tribunal, and gave their words the sort of force that would normally emanate from a place inhabited by the gods, and presided over by the Roman state religion (Cic. *Man.* 71). What is more, the Rostra, which was in its original nature a kind of triumphal monument commemorating the victory over the Latins, came ultimately to be a physical record of the history of the Roman state. Here were erected statues of prominent Romans, which stood as exemplary of the virtues that had contributed to forming the 'tradition of the elders' (*mos maiorum*), which in turn embodied the superiority of Rome over other civilizations, and gave legitimacy to Rome's empire. Thus, the Rostra came to be a place

3. Cicero, for example writing about the idea of persuading individuals that an honorable death can be desirable, says (*Tusc.* 1. 117): "Be that as it may, one must employ the greatest eloquence, just as if one were holding a *contio* from a height raised above the audience, so that those listening either begin to hope for death, or, at the very least, that they begin to desist from fearing it."

4. Both Liv. 8. 14. 12 and Cic. *Vat.* 24 call the Rostra a *templum*.

of collective memory for the Romans, a symbol of the continuity and efficacy of a political system that worked constantly to legitimate the power of the aristocracy; and it was from this same spot that the aristocrats monopolized public communication with the people.

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF *CONTIONES*

Now, the fact that the people was not authorized to participate directly in political debates does not mean that its opinions, even if manifested in a rough and tumble manner (indeed, at times via organized *clagues*), could simply be ignored.⁵ All who desired could attend a *contio*; there were no legal restrictions. In practice, and depending on the expectations awakened by the topic at hand, or by the orators who would make presentations, there might be a crowd of some hundreds, or even thousands, these all usually being inhabitants of Rome. But however many people actually attended (and a large crowd could easily be interpreted by the man who convoked the *contio* as popular approbation of his position on the matter at hand), the persons present were taken to represent the Roman people as a whole, despite the fact that they quite certainly were never more than a fraction of Rome's actual citizen population. A large crowd of this kind at a given *contio* was likely to generate rumors, which would quickly spread to the various quarters of the city, and could thereby materially affect the political climate of the city. In any case, it was a matter of utmost importance for any aspiring Roman politician to appear at *contiones*, and thus to make himself visible in Rome. In this way he would find favor with the people. What is more, it was from the tribunal that a man might stoke ill will against his enemies, thus leading to the ruin of their prestige.

The possibility of gaining a large political following via success at the *contiones* meant that these gatherings became more and more important as the republic began to wane; this was particularly so, given the role these meetings would play in the political strategy of Clodius during the 50s BC. The events just subsequent to the Ides of March in 44 BC also exemplified perfectly the importance of public opinion as manifested in the *contiones*. In the days following the assassination of the *dictator*, the murderers of Caesar were intent upon winning public support for their deed. Using their power as praetors to convoke *contiones*, Brutus and Cassius held several public discourses, in the Forum as well as on the Capitolium, regarding the slaying of Caesar.⁶ The people's response was negative, or indifferent. On the other

5. Cic. *Sest.* 106 presents the *contio* as one of the venues in which popular sentiment could be expressed. On the other hand, his distaste for those who attended such meetings, as opposed to the "true Roman people" (*verus populus Romanus*), is demonstrated on various occasions in the corpus of his writings, e.g.: Cic. *Att.* 1. 16. 11; *Amic.* 95.

6. Dio 44. 20–21, 34. 1–3; App. *BC* 2. 121–22, 137–41; Plut. *Brut.* 18. 10.

hand, Lepidus and especially Antony were able quite successfully to play to the public by giving speeches in which they mixed excoriation of the assassins with calls for reconciliation, to avoid a fresh civil war. With such messages, and these joined to the promise to maintain the acts of Caesar, they were able to win over the populace, and to deprive Caesar's murderers of any significant support at Rome. In short, their credibility turned out to be greater than that of the assassins. The result was that Brutus and Cassius had to flee the Forum, and take refuge on the Capitoline citadel; later, they would find it necessary to leave the city altogether, and eventually, they saw themselves forced to abandon Italy. Their inability to communicate directly with the populace, and thus the collapse of their leadership, led inevitably to their loss of the battle for Rome. Antony first took advantage of this situation—in spite of the efforts of Cicero to incite a war against him via the Phillipic orations, various of these held before the populace—and then later so did Octavian.

In the process that led from his being an upstart to his arriving at the station of *princeps*, Octavian took full advantage from the very first of oratory before the people. Each of his interventions in a public assembly represented an important advance in his attempt to win for himself the support of the populace. At the moment of Caesar's death, Octavian was practically unknown, and his only political capital consisted of having been named the adoptive son of the now-dead dictator. In such circumstances, to be seen by the *plebs* as Caesar's legal heir was fundamentally important, not merely due to the symbolic importance of going by the name Caius Iulius Caesar, but also because this signified the control of his adoptive father's wealth. Thus, any realization of the testamentary promises made by Caesar, many of which would affect the urban population greatly, depended on the goodwill of Octavian. Given all of this, when Octavian first arrived in Rome, in May 44, since he was not yet a senator, and therefore could not himself take part easily in a meeting of the senate, he had the tribune L. Antonius call a *contio* for him. There, Octavian addressed the people, presented himself as the only legitimate successor of Caesar, and affirmed that he would fulfill all of the promises made in his testament by Caesar. He thus gained much political capital from his adoption.⁷ And it must be said that his speaking in a *contio* implied Octavian's membership in the political elite, despite the fact he had as yet done nothing to gain either reputation (*fama*) or esteem (*dignitas*), much less *auctoritas*.

Several months later Octavian appeared again before the people, at a *contio* called for him by the tribune Cannutius.⁸ In his speech, Octavian now openly condemned Antony's political course, proclaimed himself the rightful political successor to Caesar, affirmed that he hoped to achieve the same position as his adoptive father, and gestured suggestively to the nearby statue of the dictator. After the final defeat of the assassins of Caesar and the foundation of the Triumvirate, it remained to be seen who would ultimately take power. This struggle occurred to a large degree on the field of battle. However, in the city there quickly arose a

7. Cic. *Att.* 14. 20–21, 15. 2. 2–3.

8. Dio 45. 6. 3, 48. 14. 4; App. *BC* 3. 41–42; Cic. *Att.* 16. 15. 3.

parallel fight to win the support of the urban *plebs*, and once again, the *contiones* would play a significant role in this struggle. In this venue, Octavian revealed himself as the master at gaining the people's backing. He artfully disengaged all of his principal rivals. Sextus Pompeius was revealed by Octavian as the individual who allowed the pirates to disrupt the flow of grain to Rome (App. *BC* 5. 77). Antony was painted as the turncoat cavorting with a foreign queen, Cleopatra (Dio 50. 4. 1; Plut. *Ant.* 54–55). Thus did Octavian justify in the public eye the two wars which came to their ends in the battles of Naulochus and Actium; and in doing so, he presented himself as the one who would save the republic, rather than as the initiator of hostilities.

However, Octavian's ultimate victory, which ushered in a new political regime, put an end to the great era of Roman public oratory. Yet paradoxically, his speeches before the public were emblematic of the potential of persuasion. They demonstrated forcefully the power of the spoken word, and they indicated clearly not only how important it was to control the city, but also the absolute necessity for any prospective political leader of establishing a presence for himself as an orator before the people. During the thirties BC, Octavian alone was able to take advantage of the tribunal to address the people, since his enemies were absent from Rome. With his public discourses, he was able to convert his personal enemies into enemies of the people, and of the state, while simultaneously fashioning himself as the only possible protector of Rome, Italy, and indeed, the entire West. It must be granted that the Roman *plebs* was not the decisive element in the final struggle for power. However, in the *contiones* where he addressed this audience, Octavian was able to air publicly all of his political programs and objectives, which culminated ultimately in his achieving the status at *princeps*.

THE EMPEROR SPEAKS TO THE PEOPLE

With the principate having been established, *contiones* did not disappear, though they seem to have been held significantly less frequently than they had been previously. As before, these meetings continued to be one of the principal venues for contact between state officials and the *populus*, the place where citizens received public news and information. Nonetheless, the new political order meant that these public assemblies would now be dominated by the emperor, since true political debate was no longer a real possibility. Under the principate, there was no room in the *contiones* for true controversy, nor was the podium turned over to speakers other than the prince. In general, these gatherings were now initiated by the emperor, and he would use the meetings to communicate matters that he considered important, issues that might stand as proof of his good rule and magnanimity. It was only during the civil war of 68/69 that the *contiones* partially recovered their earlier significance. During this brief interlude, the opposing parties attempted to sway public

opinion at Rome via such town hall meetings.⁹ In the end, though, this struggle, too, was decided by the armies.

The majority of the few imperial age *contiones* about which we hear were presided over by emperors, who generally were the only persons to speak. This is logical, given the emperor's position altogether, but also because his *auctoritas* was so much greater than anyone else's. Though we have not a single text of an imperial speech held before the populace (though we do know of such orations held both before the senate and among the troops), almost all the emperors engaged in this kind of communication: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Otho, Vitellius, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Septimius Severus, and Severus Alexander. This last emperor, for example, convened a gathering of the people on the Capitolium, to announce his victory over the Persians and the concomitant circus games (*HA Sev. Alex.* 57. 1). No doubt, purely informative *contiones*, like this one, continued to be necessary under the principate. Nonetheless, it seems likely that emperors themselves will have made an appearance only when especially important business was at hand, otherwise leaving the consuls or the prefect of the city to address the crowd. Just as in the republican period, public funeral laudations also took place in the context of a *contio* spoken from the Rostra. During the empire, though, most public funerals were held for members of the imperial family.

Aside from such funeral laudations, the type of imperial age *contio* best attested by our sources is that convened to introduce the new consuls of each year. At these gatherings, the newly installed consuls would swear an oath to obey the laws, and the outgoing pair would likewise adjure that they had faithfully adhered to these statutes during their terms of office. These assemblies thus continued a republican tradition, though now, the emperors were again most often the chief protagonists. Caligula took his oath as consul from the Rostra, and Claudius did the same (*Dio* 59. 13. 1, 60. 10. 1). This was obviously an act of, essentially, political propaganda, with the emperor presenting himself to the people as a *bonus princeps*, one who would submit himself to the rule of law, just like any other decent citizen. It is just this aspect of being emperor that Pliny, in his *Panegyric* to the emperor Trajan, repeatedly stresses. As Pliny puts it, "the Prince does not stand above the laws, but they above him. And by the same token, as consul he is allowed no more than the other consuls." Then, as Pliny goes on to say, "Caesar, you subjected yourself on the Rostra with reverence to laws, which were not made to bind a Prince." (*Plin. Pan.* 65)

Naturally, the public attending such meetings had no function other than to serve as spectators and witnesses to the event, that is, to affirm by its presence the legitimacy of certain public acts. This was the case, for example, with the adoption of Trajan by Nerva. For this purpose, Nerva convened a *contio* on the Capitolium, to announce that he would have a new son, hence, an intended successor (*Plin. Pan.* 8. 3). It may be that we can observe a sort of precedent for this procedure in a notice

9. On Galba as orator, see *Tac. Hist.* 1. 39. On Vitellius: *Suet. Vit.* 15. 2–3; *Tac. Hist.* 3. 36, 68. On Otho: *Tac. Hist.* 1. 90.

transmitted by Suetonius, who writes that Augustus swore, in a *contio*, that he had adopted Tiberius for the good of the state (Suet. *Tib.* 21. 3). In any case, Nerva's action is on the whole exceptional, and must be understood as a calculated political gesture, as a mechanism for establishing a closer relationship with the people and in contrast to the recent 'tyranny' of Domitian.

In this context are to be understood the coins and reliefs of Trajan and Hadrian, in which these emperors are represented addressing the people. Under the empire, a typical iconographic representation on the coinage involved speeches by the emperor to his soldiers (we find such scenes on the coins of Caligula, Nero, Galba, Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian). These coin types display the emperor, wearing his military uniform, as he communicates with the army. These representations of the *adlocutio* (address) to the soldiers do not find a counterpart for the civilian realm. We have no preserved representation of a civil *contio* until the age of Trajan.

Nonetheless, a few coins (*sestertii*) minted during the reign of Trajan do present, on their reverses, the emperor dressed in the toga (i.e., his civilian costume), standing on the orator's tribunal, and accompanied by another person, who also wears a toga.¹⁰ Here, Trajan raises his right hand, a gesture well recognizable to all Romans as characteristic of an orator delivering a speech, just as we see in the famous Arringatore statue from the republican period, a statue that now stands as the iconographic paradigm for the civilian orator (see fig. 13.1). Before the emperor are several toga-clad Romans, raising their hands in acclamation of him. The scene is completed on the left by inclusion of the turning post from the circus, upon which stands a figure, perhaps the divine spirit of the place (*Genius loci*). The legend that accompanies this image is SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI SC (The Senate and the Roman People to the Best Prince by Decision of the Senate; see fig. 13.2). The scene depicted on this coin reflects an announcement made by the emperor regarding the circus (perhaps his speech even took place there), perhaps concerning the celebration of games, perhaps regarding a project of construction or reconstruction of that edifice (cf. Plin. *Pan.* 51. 3–5).

Hadrian had two distinct series of coins minted, both sporting depictions of civil *contiones*.¹¹ In both series the emperor appears on the reverse. He stands on a tribunal decorated with ships' beaks, behind which rises a temple with Corinthian columns. The prince raises his right hand, as several citizens standing below him raise their hands toward him in acclamation. The tribunal is presumably the *rostra* of the temple of the Divine Julius Caesar. The difference in the two series is that while in the one Hadrian appears alone on the tribunal, with the legend COS III SC (consul for the third time, by decision of the senate; see fig. 13.3), in the other series he is accompanied by children, again with the legend SC. Thus, these two series must be referring to two distinct matters. In the first case, we have no evidence that

10. *RIC* II, p. 283, no. 553; Strack 1931: 133, fig. V 363; *BMCRE* III, p. 175, nos. 827–28.

11. *RIC* II, p. 424, nos. 639–41; Strack 1933: 113–15, fig. IX 599; *BMCRE* III, p. 433, nos. 1309–11.



Figure 13.1. Statue of Aulus Metellus, so-called L'Arringatore. First century BC. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze.



Figure 13.2. Reverse, sestertertius of Trajan speaking to the people. *RIC II* p. 283 no. 553.
Photo courtesy of the American Numismatic Society: ANS 1964.183.1.rev.1735.



Figure 13.3. Reverse, Hadrian on a tribunal. *RIC* II p. 424 nos. 639–41. Photo courtesy of the American Numismatic Society: ANS 1977.284.5.rev.1735.

would allow us to identify the scene; perhaps the matter at hand was an assembly celebrated after Hadrian's return from his first trip to the eastern Mediterranean, or it could be that we are here dealing with the announcement of some benefaction made by the emperor. As far as the second type is concerned, we must obviously presume some matter involving children. We are most probably dealing with Hadrian's extension of the alimentary program for the Italian youth, which Trajan before him had promoted (*HA Had.* 7. 8).

From roughly the same period, we also have sculptural reliefs depicting the act of addressing the populace. In the so-called *Anaglypha*, whose attribution to Trajan or Hadrian is not entirely secure, we find on one side the emperor represented as he stands on the *rostra* of the temple of Caesar. He is togate, is accompanied by several other togate personages, and is holding an oration (see fig. 13.4). Given that to the right of those attending the assembly we see a monument that symbolizes the alimentary program, the suggestion has been made that the relief depicts the creation of this program by Trajan, or its expansion by Hadrian. On the other hand, since there are no children to be seen in this relief, some have thought that we are here dealing with the announcement of some other kind of benefaction for the people. Be that as it may, the relief clearly serves to record an act of generosity by the Prince, which was announced to the public at a *contio*.

Finally, a relief from the so-called Arch of Portogallo shows Hadrian standing on a tribunal, and addressing the public, which is represented by a semi-nude figure (see fig. 13.5). Just beneath the tribunal one sees a child, whom many are inclined to identify as Lucius Verus. Now, given that this relief was accompanied, on the original monument, by another relief that portrayed the apotheosis of Hadrian's wife Sabina, it has been thought that the Portogallo relief depicts the funeral oration held in honor of Sabina. Nonetheless, given that two other figures stand on

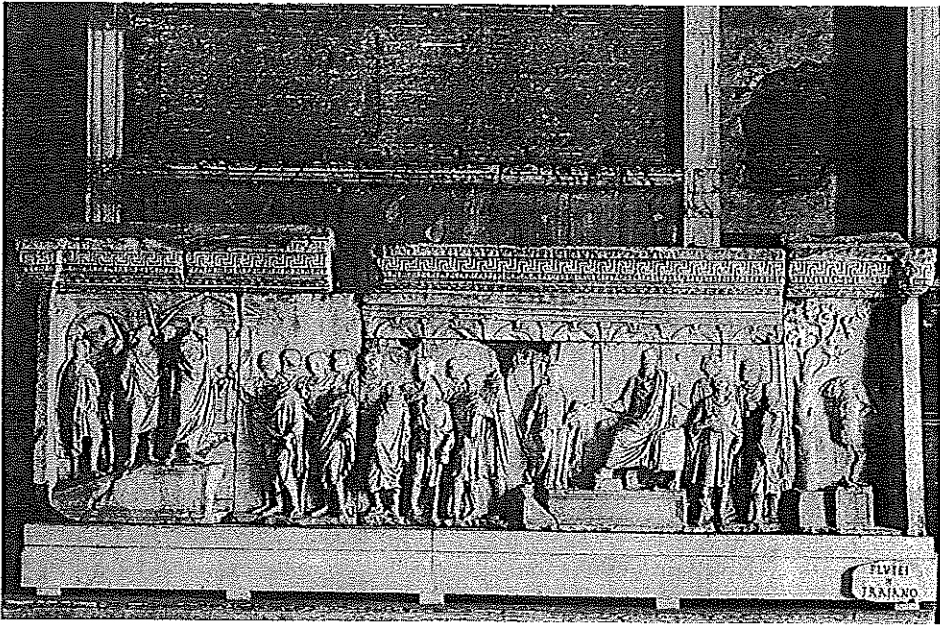


Figure 13.4. Relief of the so-called Anaglypha Traiani. Rome, Forum Romanum. Second century AD. Photo DAI Rome 1968.2784, photo Felbermeyer.

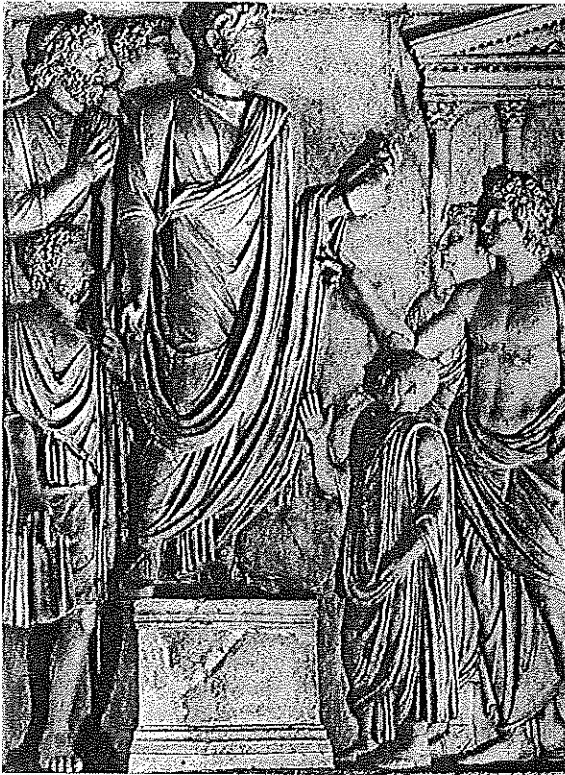


Figure 13.5. Relief belonging to the so-called Arch of Portogallo, Rome, depicting Hadrian addressing the populace. Second century AD. Rome, Musei Capitolini. Archivio Fotografico dei Musei Capitolini. Inv. MC 809/S.

the tribunal alongside the emperor (who is holding a roll in his left hand), and given that the youth standing beneath the tribunal shows no overt sign of being an aristocratic child, there remains the possibility that we are dealing here with an official act, perhaps again, one connected with the alimentary system. In any case, the scene is much less realistic than the others thus far described here, and might therefore intend to represent the emperor symbolically in his function as orator before the people.

This concentration, during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, of coins and reliefs that depict civil *contiones* demonstrates, on the one hand, the vivacity of this type of assembly as a method of communication between the emperor and the populace during the early principate. These representations are also, though, a mechanism of self-representation for the emperor. That is to say, we understand these portrayals as part of the propaganda intended to create an image of the *optimus princeps* (the ideal emperor) and of the *civilis princeps*. Whatever the exact historical circumstances that may have lain behind the scenes just observed, these representations place significant emphasis on the relationship between the emperor and his subjects. The very act of calling an assembly, and there addressing the people directly, was in itself a gesture of respect and generosity toward the common folk. It is this approach to the people that the iconography of the coins and reliefs was attempting to emphasize; and the enthusiastic response of the crowd formed a decisive part of the apologetic propaganda for the *princeps*, this modeled, nonetheless, on the usual hierarchical pattern, in other words, speech from a higher place and acclamation from below.

In his correspondence with Marcus Aurelius, Fronto insists on the importance of rhetorical training for a good emperor, given that eloquence would be indispensable just generally in public life, and especially for dealings with, and in, the senate. Nor does Fronto neglect the matter of speaking in popular assemblies as a requisite for him, who would govern properly (Fro. *Amic.* 141. 22 Naber = Haines 2. p. 58). Indeed, we know that Marcus Aurelius participated in various *contiones*, and that Fronto praised his ex-student for the outstanding oratorical skill displayed on these occasions.¹² The author of the *Historia Augusta* considered Marcus to be a paradigmatically good emperor, one endowed with virtues similar to those attributed by Pliny in his *Panegyric* to Trajan; among these virtues was the habit of comporting himself like a private citizen (*civiliter*), along with his personal concern for the people (*HA Marc. Ant.* 7. 1, 8. 1, 8. 5, 8. 9, 12. 1, 26. 3). We encounter something similar in the case of Severus Alexander, whom the *Historia Augusta* author presents as being a good prince, in the mold of Trajan, Hadrian, or Marcus Aurelius. One of the virtues attributed to Alexander is that of frequently addressing the populace: "he held many *contiones* in the city, much like the tribunes and consuls of old" (*HA Sev. Alex.* 25. 11).

12. Fro. *Amic.* 40. 7 Naber = Haines 1 p. 52. For other instances of Marcus Aurelius participating in *contiones*, see *HA Marc. Ant.* 7. 11 and Dio 72. 32. 1.

There can be no doubt that the acts of communication and interaction with the populace in the context of *contiones* became, under the early empire, one of the chief characteristics of the good emperor. Thus, the iconographic type of the *princeps* speaking to the people came to represent the emperor's magnanimity (*liberalitas*), while simultaneously being a symbol of his obligation to behave as a simple citizen (*civilitas*). It showed that he was close to his subjects, and would always protect them. Likewise here was a demonstration of his competence in leading; and this image lent his governance a certain sheen of respect for the venerable republican traditions.

CONCLUSION

At Rome, public oratory had always played a central role in politics; however, speaking before the people had also never been a right of every citizen, and never formed part of freedom (*libertas*) as it was construed by the Romans. Speaking to the people was, rather, one of the constituent elements of the power of magistrates, and it went hand in hand with the *auctoritas* wielded by certain members of the society. In practice, to speak before the populace was a privilege reserved for the social elite, and this entailed, then, effective control of most of the political information in the community. This right belonged to the entire aristocracy during the republic, and was then taken over by the emperor, in whose person was concentrated effectively all formal political power (*potestas*) as well as all political clout (*auctoritas*). The emperor's word came to be the only one that really mattered. Be this all as it may, the *contiones* always had been, and always remained, an absolutely essential mechanism of societal communication, even if they always did work from top to bottom in the society. These meetings also served, of course, to gain favor and popularity for the orators with the populace at Rome. The *contio* was a vehicle for debate and persuasion before the Roman people, who functioned simultaneously as witness and spectator. For as Cicero claimed, without the public, there could be no orator (Cic. *de Orat.* 2. 338, *Brut.* 192).

SUGGESTED READING

In the main, ancient sources have been used to support arguments in this chapter. The larger bibliography just below will help the reader to become oriented in this topic more broadly. The most significant works, though, are these. For public speaking and its effects during the period of (especially) the late republic, one should consult Pina Polo 1989 and 1996, Hölkeskamp 1995, Laser 1997, Millar 1998, Mouritsen 2001, Morstein-Marx 2004, and Hiebel 2009. For the imperial period, Yavetz 1969 is still an essential study, though it can now be well supplemented by Bell 2004.

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CHAPTER 14

THE SECOND SOPHISTIC

THOMAS A. SCHMITZ

It is difficult to provide a satisfactory definition of the term 'Second Sophistic.' It was coined by a Greek intellectual of the third century AD, Philostratus.¹ His *Lives of the Sophists*, an anecdotal, highly idiosyncratic history of the movement, defines the phenomenon in a functional, transhistorical way (Whitmarsh 2005: 4–5). Philostratus claims that the history of the Second Sophistic began in the fourth century BC with the Attic orator Aeschines (VS 481–82); but he also includes sophists such as Gorgias, Protagoras, or Hippias of Elis, all active during the fifth century BC, in his account. Whenever the movement may be taken to have begun, for Philostratus, improvised declamation is the decisive factor for defining the Second Sophistic. Ultimately, though, he is interested in establishing (or constructing) a classical pedigree for the sophists of the imperial era. Hence, his anecdotal account provides a wealth of information on the historical, political, and social circumstances of the sophists, but does not answer the question as to why a revival of sophistic-style learning and oratorical display became such a prominent social and intellectual phenomenon during the second and third centuries AD.

This lack of a clear definition may offer a (partial) explanation of the fact that modern scholars have been much divided about the scope and the importance

1. There are several authors by the name of 'Philostratus'; two of them are mentioned in the *Lives of the Sophists*; neither of them is the author of this work. While we can be confident that at least two different individuals must have contributed to the corpus of works transmitted under this name, we cannot hope to obtain certainty concerning the attribution of individual works to these authors, but one may consult: Solmsen 1941; Rothe 1989: 1–5; Flinterman 1995: 5–14; and de Lannoy 1997. On Philostratus, see now Bowie and Elsner 2009.