

Transcript of the episode of Privacy Studies Podcast: The Role of the Dead in the Political Culture of the Roman Republic – Presentation by Viktor Wretström (Lund University, Sweden)

Hello, my name is Felicia Fricke and I am Natacha Klein Käfer, and you are listening to the Privacy Studies Podcast.

This season of the Privacy Studies Podcast follows the discussions of the symposium *PRIVACY AND DEATH: Past and Present*, which took place at the University of Copenhagen and online between October 12th and 13th, 2023. This event aimed to bring to the fore the discussions of what kind of privacy, if any, we have given to our dead in different cultural and historical contexts. We will hear presentations by historians, archaeologists, sociologists, and other experts.

Transcriptions of the episodes can be found on the Centre for Privacy Studies' website.

In today's episode, we will hear from Viktor Wretström from Lund University in Sweden. His presentation is entitled 'The Role of the Dead in the Political Culture of the Roman Republic'.

About the political culture within the Roman aristocratic elite in the Roman Republic. And I'm going to start in the middle of action here with the funeral games or the *Ludi Funebres*, of Gaius Julius Caesar. For you to know your dates, and I think we'll notice that there is something off with this date, because this is not the famous Gaius Julius Caesar. It is instead the father of Gaius Julius Caesar. And on this occasion, the younger Caesar has commissioned a great funeral feast to celebrate his father. Among other things, he's handing out free food, especially meat, which is very luxurious. And he has invited about 300 gladiators to put on games. If you're even more well versed in the dates of antiquity, you will also notice that this date is actually wrong for another reason. For the elder Gaius Julius Caesar has actually been dead for 20 years. So this is a very clearly political use of his father in a later stage, where he, because in this role, Caesar is an *idyll* (Aedile), a lower magistrate of the Roman Republic, and he's applying to become the next Pontius Maximus, or the next high priest. So this is actually, I mean, it's a political ploy.

And just to give a sort of conceptualization of the death in Rome, we can go through the procession. And thank you for the last lecture, which has given us some of the background for this. But yes, so it would begin, I mean, with the death being announced. If this is a public figure, it will be announced in a public forum. Then the mourning was supposed to be private, which means it was taken to the home. And in the Roman case, the body would be laid on the floor, on the cold ground, because that was the same process as children. So if a child was accepted in the family, they were laid on the ground. And at the moment of death they were also laid back on the ground. And this was, even though it's a private event, inside the private home of the aristocratic family, it is also a public event. The clients are supposed to come and visit, and other allies of the family. This could then, if it's a very prominent person, be followed by a procession, which is a sort of mourning in the public. This would be the walking of the corpse, usually carried, or sometimes even popped up on a chair, carried in his clothes of office, if he has been in a magistrate, and accompanied with actors who have played the deceased's other ancestors who had prominent roles. And they would be carrying such a thing called *imagines*, which is a death mask of the dead ancestors. And they would also be dressed in the clothes of these ancestors. It was also common to have paid actors, usually women, who would show lamentation and cry very dramatically to show this suffering of the family. And as in many cases we discussed here before, the men were supposed to not show very much feeling on the outside. But again, if you're very prominent, you could also get a *Laudatio Funeris* or a funeral speech on the forum, the big

political scene of the Roman Republic, where the deceased would be glorified, usually by a close ally or his heir. And then this would be followed by the burial, which was in the Roman case, or the Romanus mos tradition, always a cremation. This cremation could be, I mean, it was put in tombs and the tombs were also a source of political propaganda. So this is just this is probably one of the most famous tombs. It's in the Vatican Museum of one of the members of the Scipio family or the Cornelius Scipio who his descendants would put up this text bragging about his good deeds as a magistrate. And it's very focused on his political deeds, not on his personal. I mean, he's strong and wise and so on. And very importantly, I don't think it's mentioned in this text he also made descendants. It's a very important thing that he brought family name forward. And then in most cases, this was done, the funeral games were done closer to death than in Caesar's case, where you could have large public games and this could be gladiatorial games, it could be the dealing of food, the vizcariato, and this is very much in the Roman concept of panem et circenses, meaning bread and circuses or games that were put on for the public. So it's a very good way of getting elected to new positions.

And this is a very incorrect question because everyone dies, but some are kind of overrepresented in this. So the life expectancy in antiquity was very low, around the 20s or 30s. But this is mainly because of the overrepresentation of children who die young. So more than about half of every child could not expect to turn one. And even though like this first year, it wasn't one of the very most deadly.. or one of the third, Sorry, one of the third.. Half would be dead before turning ten. So childhood was a very dangerous period. Another group that is overrepresented in young deaths is that of women. And this is mainly for childbirth reasons and also because most women in Rome were married at a very young age, which also makes it more dangerous to give birth. And this is just a statistic of that most marriages would end within one to two years, in the majority of cases, because of the death of the woman. So most first-time wedded women would be expected to die pretty much. Quite dark.

Men had it a bit better. I mean, they still died of disease, war and so on. But most could expect to have a life expectancy of about 50 if they survived the dangerous years of childhood. And this also created large age gaps because mostly, especially between men and women, but especially between men and their sons, which would also explain that most politically active men would have a dead father. And just here for short statistics on the elderly, you were old at 60, you were senium or pretty much useless at 70, if you follow the old statistics. But about one in every six persons could expect to turn 60. And then it drastically goes down from there on. Very, very few. Would ever turn 90.

And so how could death be used in more than this very direct way that I showed Cesar using it? And this would be a bit related to death, but also to legacy. Sometimes you could use the memory of a dead father as a very positive thing for your own political agenda. So this case Gaius Marcius Rutilus and his son. This will be the case for all these people. They have the same name. Gaius Marcius Rutilus who then got the cognomen Censorinus. The father was one of the first ever plebeian consuls. So he was one of the first ever non-patricians to become a consul. He would later go on to be one of the champions of the plebeian aristocracy, with becoming the first ever plebeian dictator, the first ever plebeian censor. These are all fancy, good magistrate titles. And the second ever plebeian to celebrate the triumph. So when the son, and you can see here the showing of a very large age gap between them, it's nearly 50 years between father and son. So when the son becomes active, the plebeians have gained more ground within the Roman political system. And it's very normal for them to become consuls by this point. So that when he becomes a consul in 310, it's no surprise. But before this, he has also become the first ever plebeian to become high priest in both the pontiffs and the augurs, the

two major priesthoods within Rome. And this he has done without any previous achievements. So this is clearly a connection with the legacy that his father, long since dead, had given him. He later becomes one of the very important figures in the Roman history, as he is the only plebeian or patrician to ever become a censor twice. And that's why he gains this last cognomen, Censorinus, which was then passed on to all his descendants. But sometimes legacy can be a curse because you're always compared with the result or achievements of your father. And this is the case for the two, Quintus Fulvius Flaccus and the son, Quintus Fulvius Flaccus. The father, the elder, was active during the Second Punic War. And I don't think we should spend much time reading out all his achievements, but you can say he was one of the great heroes of that war. When the son, a lot later, becomes active in politics, both his contemporaries, according to later historians and these historians that write about him, very clearly compare him with his father negatively. So even though the younger Flaccus, has a very brilliant career, he is always seen as not as good as the father. So he becomes, for example, he becomes censor, he becomes consul. I think he triumphs once or twice, even. Very prestigious. And would he not have had this famous father he would probably have been remembered very fondly within the Republic. But in the end, so you can see he has a very short career, only seven years, and he ends this career by suicide. And that's where Livius writes, just a very short, an ugly death, because he could not live up to his father and he could not live up to the Roman standards, even in his death, because he took suicide by hanging, which was seen as Roman as an ugly sort of suicide, because you should die by either cutting the wrist or a sword to the stomach. The same with legacy is that you try or the Romans tried with legacy to establish a precedence of success. So these are descendants of the previously mentioned Cornelius Scipio, whose tomb I showed, which is a tendency for this family to connect themselves with the region of Africa, which is today's Tunisia. And this starts with the most famous of them, which is Scipio Africanus, who is the victor of the Second Punic War in 202 B.C. He defeats Hannibal and the Carthage at the Second Punic War. His adopted grandson, Scipio Aemilianus, later in 146 B.C. wins the Third Punic War and pretty much ends the presence of the Carthage within Roman or within the Mediterranean world. Nearly a century later, when Rome is a very different place and dominated by the late Republican, very populist politicians. And this is in the time of Caesar. The senatorial class tries to make a resistance against the rise of Caesar. And first, following Pompey losing in Greece, they choose a new place to take their last stand. And it's no coincidence that as they are led by the last Scipio, Metellus Scipio, that depict Africa as one of their final standpoints. And this is at least my belief in this is that this is an attempt to summon these previous victories of his descendants to give them success in this last battle. But it's I mean, it's obvious Caesar is going to win and at Thapsus 46 B.C. Metellus Scipio is defeated and the senatorial class is destroyed. And but in a good way, he ends this as a Roman by suicide in the correct way.

Death was also used as a political message in other more indirect ways. And these are two cases, Tiberius Gracchus a very famous reformer and Publius Claudius, a very infamous Roman aristocrat, I would say. Both were tribunes of the plebs and both were killed in a way that both their allies and their enemies could use their death against them. And so first Tiberius Gracchus was killed after proposing land reforms in Rome. And these land reforms were on the public side, meaning that they preferred the people and were, in a sense, giving land back from aristocracy to the people. And was, of course, for this reason, very negatively seen among the aristocracy. And the leader of this is another Scipio - So you see, this is one of the bigger families - was Pontifex, meaning the high priest in Rome. And he went so far as to declare *Consecratio*, meaning a sacred killing on Gracchus. So not only was Gracchus murdered in the open street of Rome, he was murdered by his.. I mean, he was an aristocrat as well..

He was murdered by former friends and allies and by the high priest himself. The high priest wasn't allowed to touch bodies, but he was the one trading the body in this case. So very, very brutal. And to show their strategic defeat especially with Gracchus they took his body and the bodies of his followers, who were killed with them and threw them into Tiber, so the river, which was a way that you disposed of the bodies of criminals.

Much later or a few decades later, it's the populist Publius Claudius, who was an ally and friend of Caesar, who was caught in the open street together with his allies by one of Pompey's followers, Titus Milo. And there occurred a brawl. Claudius was killed together with most of his friends. And because Caesar had so much power, they couldn't just throw his body anywhere. It was carried, taken care of in the correct way and then brought to the forum where they were going to hold a funeral speech. In this funeral speech, they create such emotions with the people that they end up burning the body on the spot. The problem is the spot is the curia, meaning the senatorial meeting house. So not only does Claudius in his death burn on the very ground place of the forum, he also burns down the senatorial house, which is later where Gaius Julius Caesar would be. He's not killed in the senatorial house. He's instead killed in Pompey's theater, which had to act as a temporary meeting ground for the Senate. And so to make this circle complete from the Gaius Julius Caesar holding the funeral games for his father, we turn to the dead Caesar, who is now being used as a political propaganda by his heirs. For in his death. after the group known as the liberatores meaning the freedom grantors, pretty much, which was the senatorial class, who had stabbed him in the Senate. His ally, and this is a much later painting, Mark Anthony uses the dead Caesar and the body of dead Caesar by showing it to the public that the brutality the Senate had done would, I mean, it enacted the public again, like Milo or in the case of Claudius, to rise up against the liberatores, who saw themselves as heroes, but in the eyes of the people became the enemy. And they would, by the result of this, the showing of the dead body of Caesar, actually be thrown out of Rome. And would later lose the civil war that followed with Mark Anthony and Octavianus. Don't forget him. And I'm done with it.

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