

*Catilina* 7 and the Pseudo-Valla Commentary: The *Virtus* of the Ancestors

Though man and brute hold in common the ability to act, to man alone falls reason. Therefore, he must make proper use of both, performing great deeds in accord with *virtus*. “Nam,” Sallust writes, “divitiarum et formae gloria fluxa atque fragilis est, virtus clara aeternaque habetur” (*Catilina*, section 1). This is the theme of Sallust’s history. Throughout the work, Sallust uses the circumstances surrounding Catiline’s conspiracy to create a framework for understanding the human condition, particularly with regard to *virtus*. In section 7, Sallust highlights the pristine example of his ancestors to teach both the value of *virtus* and the way to achieve it. Ps.-Valla is very sensitive to this goal. Many of his notes on this section, in fact, recall the reader to this very fact, or encourage him to consider the great example of these men. Ps.-Valla is particularly concerned in this passage with the difference between *boni* and *mali*, the precise meaning of *virtus*, and the relationship between *virtus* and the State.

Clearly distinguishing Ps.-Valla’s definition of *boni* and *mali* is a difficult one. While he does provide synonyms, these seem to contradict many of his other comments. However, it is clear that he holds in a positive light those men who work hard, pursue *gloria*, and otherwise act within moderation, while condemning those who seek transitory pleasures. Ps.-Valla’s definition of a man with *virtus*, in this passage, is one who labors hard for his *patria*, regardless of the opposition, and competes with his peers in performing noble deeds. Ps.-Valla rightly understands that, in Sallust, the form of the State has a great effect upon the *virtus* of the people. On one hand, an empire ruled by a king does not encourage men to be great-spirited because the king envies the praise of others; on the other hand, *libertas* allows men to benefit from pursuing *virtus*, as, having used it to earn the esteem of their peers, they gain for themselves political offices and other privileges.

The notes in the Ps.-Valla commentary constantly draw the reader back to Sallust's theme, reinforcing the moral tone of the ancient work. Often, Ps.-Valla supplies synonyms and alternative explanations for Sallustian locutions and, more often than not, these clarify the precise meaning of *virtus*, or the difference between *boni* and *mali*. Sometimes, though rarely, Ps.-Valla's commentary suggests an interpretation of Sallust that is not present in the text. Particularly problematic is the question of whether the historian intended *boni* and *mali* to be understood as strictly moral terms, or if they are better used to describe those who are considered by others to exhibit these characteristics. Nonetheless, the theme of *Catilina* – *virtus* – is clearly highlighted in the humanist commentary on section 7.

#### Work Cited

Valla, Ps.-Laurentius. "Hoc in uolumine haec continentur. Pomponii Epistola ad Augustinum Mapheum. C. Crispi Salustii bellum catilinarium cum commento Laurentii uallensis", etc. Venice: Christophorus de Pensis, 1495. Available at <[http://dfg-viewer.de/show/set\[mets\]=http%3A%2F%2Fdaten.digitale-sammlungen.de%2F~db%2Fmets%2Fbsb00015452\\_metx.xml](http://dfg-viewer.de/show/set[mets]=http%3A%2F%2Fdaten.digitale-sammlungen.de%2F~db%2Fmets%2Fbsb00015452_metx.xml)>.