

## The Role of *Tabernarii* in the Grassroots Politics of Late Republican Rome

“Collective protest is spun out of a network of preexisting ties, ties of occupation and neighborhood that create solidarity and make organization possible.” P. Nord, *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment*

Cicero depicts the political environment of the Late Republic as wrought with turmoil, civil war and class struggles. The scholarship dealing with this transformative historical period focuses on the elite politicians involved in the strife; and consequently, has largely ignored the political clout of the urban *plebs*, who nonetheless affected change in the government through “popular pressure”<sup>1</sup>, riots and organized support of *populares* candidates.<sup>2</sup> Clodius was arguably the first senator to recognize and effectively harness this potential power, appealing to the *vulgus* by proposing and forcibly ratifying legislature that benefited the working classes.<sup>3</sup> In addition, he fashioned himself as a champion of the *plebs* and a member of their society, which was centered upon the *vicus* (neighborhood).<sup>4</sup>

This paper will argue that the *tabernarii* (shopkeepers), who numbered among Clodius’ supporters<sup>5</sup>, were in a unique position to take part in the burgeoning grassroots politics of the period since their shops, which according to both literary sources and archaeological evidence lined the streets and major thoroughfares of the city, positioned them within the midst of the *vicus*’ society. R. Laurence has recently argued that streets were multi-functional spaces where

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<sup>1</sup> Yavetz (1969): 39.

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include J-M. Flambard (1977), F. Millar (1998) and P. Vanderbroeck (1987).

<sup>3</sup> e.g the *Lex Clodius de collegii* repealed the senatorial decree of 64 BC and reestablished *collegia*. The ability to form new *collegia* undoubtedly benefited retailers, traders and craftsmen.

<sup>4</sup> The *vicus* became an officially recognized administrative zone under Augustus (7 BC).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Cicero. *Dom.*54 and 89.

people congregated to exchange information, take part in religious cult and engage in commercial activities.<sup>6</sup> In effect the *vicus* was for the *plebs* what the forum was for the Roman elite.<sup>7</sup> Along these lines, any murmurs of discontent and/or resentment felt toward the senate would have first been expressed in the streets and on the very thresholds of *tabernae*. A shared occupation and the development, albeit informal in this period, of a neighborhood identity may have encouraged *tabernarii* to organize in support of Clodius' campaign for tribune in 59 BC.<sup>8</sup> This paper will incorporate modern theories of urban geography and urbanism into its analysis of the *tabernarii* to argue that the urban revolution in Rome, which began in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c BC, promoted the role of commerce in urban society. As a result, the mercantile class helped activate grassroots movements, which allowed the *plebs urbana* a stronger voice in Late Republican politics.<sup>9</sup>

#### Work Cited

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence (2001): 104-105.

<sup>7</sup> Laurence (2001): 100.

<sup>8</sup> Nord (1986): 23.

<sup>9</sup> Lefebvre (2003): 15.

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