

## POLITICAL GRAFFITI IN THE LATE ROMAN REPUBLIC: “HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS” AND “COMMON KNOWLEDGE”\*

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Communication is fundamental to any polity – but especially to a popularly based political system, whether it be more like Athenian-style democracy or the Roman Republic. Regimes that rely on citizens’ votes to select their officials and political leaders and to establish their laws must have various means by which individual popular interests can be expressed, articulated, negotiated against other interests within the community, and at least the opportunity be given to forge them into a dominant consensus before they are put to the decisive and often divisive test of the ballot. The greater the social distance between mass and political elite (much more in Rome, it seems, than in Athens), the more important such ongoing communication across status-lines would appear to be: how exactly *did* a Roman noble know how the “anonymous mass” would respond to a particular legislative proposal, and on the other side, how might even one of the “artisans and shopkeepers”, who are so often invoked as constituents of the Forum crowd – not to mention other, less mobilized segments of the society of the Urbs – try to influence the political agenda in a system such as the Roman, in which formal initiative lay entirely on the side of the magistrate and there was no place for ὁ βουλευόμενος to lay his concerns before the assembly?

The *contio*, that public assembly summoned for the purpose of speech-making and public will-formation, is, of course, an important part of the answer. The *contio* provided a forum to test the popular will, to measure its intensity and to mobilize potential voters to the degree necessary to deliver an overwhelming result on the day of the legislative assembly.<sup>1</sup> Yet even before a tribune came before the *contio* to promulgate a measure, the proposal was already largely formulated and there was little room to back down without losing face; moreover, to ensure success on voting day the response of audiences in the *contio* had to be immediately

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1 Morstein-Marx 2004, esp. 160–203.

powerful since the momentum had to be sustained over the following three weeks to the vote.<sup>2</sup> Thus by the time a political initiative reached even the stage of being brought before the *contio* much prior communicative work must already have been done. No Roman noble wanted to run much of a risk that his great moment in the eye of the *populus Romanus* would fall completely flat or “freeze”, as Cicero put it.<sup>3</sup> And from a “*plebs*’ eye view”, on the other hand, is it reasonable to suppose that citizens muzzled themselves and politely waited for magistrates to divine their desires and take action on behalf of the Roman People according to their own preconceptions?

We are often told that Rome’s was a “face-to-face society” – a term whose applicability seems dubious anyway in an urban metropolis pushing toward one million souls, not to mention all the Italian citizens after the *lex Iulia*, but one which also encourages a tendency not to reflect much further on how, and how effectively, interests were communicated across socio-political boundaries. There must have been an enormous variety among these styles of communicative interaction. Crowd-watching at *contiones* and the spectacles or the theater, conversations during the *salutatio* and the electoral “walkabouts” must have provided much information.<sup>4</sup> But the shouts, murmuring, groans and so on emitted by crowds, about which we hear so much, were typically prompted by other agents (senatorial speakers, actors) and certainly interpreted in self-serving ways by the elite observers, who are our (ultimate) sources on these practices. Political graffiti, on the other hand, hold out the promise of revealing, if only sporadically and incompletely, a more autonomous form of “bottom-up” communication. I shall argue that some examples of late-republican political graffiti provide precious examples out of all proportion to their small extant number of what I shall call plebeian “communicative agency”, a term I use to embrace the ability *both* to resist and critique the dominant elite discourse *and* to initiate communication rather than solely responding with applause or shouts to the prompting of senatorial speakers, as in the *contio*. Plebeian “communicative agency” can serve as an important counterweight to the Gramscian concept of “cultural hegemony” or other versions of Marxist “false consciousness” that offer tempting but perhaps too simple explanations for the apparent deference of the Roman *plebs* to elite speech and persuasion, and thus for the disproportionate power possessed by the senatorial elite in a political system in which the vote of the People in the central functions of government (especially choice of officials and legislation) was determinative.

Historians might be forgiven for seeing “cultural hegemony” virtually wherever we look – since it seems to be all over our sources. Gramsci’s theory seems

2 Some proposals were apparently revised after their original unveiling, e.g. the supposed first version of Tiberius Gracchus’ agrarian proposal (Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 10.4). However, this is not presented as a sort of “testing of the waters”, but as a (failed) attempt at compromise to soften the anticipated resistance.

3 Cic. *Att.* 1.14.1: *frigebat*.

4 On the *contio* see Morstein-Marx 2004, 119–159; on theatrical responses see esp. Flaig 1995, 118–124, and 2004, 237–242; on the electoral performance see Morstein-Marx 1998.

especially useful for the many cases like the Roman Republic or (for Gramsci) modern bourgeois society, in which an under-class fails to realize its enormous theoretical power to pursue its own interest; this must, Gramsci thought, be because in the face of the ideological power of the dominant class, the dominated fail actually to perceive their true interests, or are persuaded to abandon them, or simply come to regard them as impossible, utopian ideals. Nearly two decades ago now the political scientist-cum-anthropologist James C. Scott threw out an invigorating challenge to both “thick” and “thin” versions of Gramsci’s theory in his highly readable book entitled *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990). Therein he argues powerfully (though, of course, not absolutely decisively) that the dominant discourse of the elite hardly serves in fact to *convince* the oppressed of the legitimacy of their own domination: this is, for Scott, merely a story the elite anxiously tell themselves, based partly on the fact that the discourse of resistance is driven underground and emerges only cryptically in what Scott called “hidden transcripts”. For Scott, dominance is actually perpetuated not by ideological means (i.e. actually convincing the oppressed to be “good slaves”) but by sheer intimidation (that is, by forcing them, because of the hopelessness of overt resistance, to *pretend* to be “good slaves” while under direct elite surveillance). In Scott’s way of thinking, then, the very image of the orator and political leader in Classical literature would be a sort of fantasy-ideal of elite control over the dangerous passions of the multitude, and we should be careful not to be taken in by it. Think of Virgil’s simile of the orator in *Aeneid* I:

And just as, often, when a crowd of people  
Is rocked by a rebellion, and the rabble  
Rage in their minds, and firebrands and stones  
Fly fast – for fury finds its weapons – if,  
By chance, they see a man remarkable  
For righteousness and service, they are silent  
And stand attentively; and he controls  
Their passion by his words and cools their spirits.  
(*Aen.* 1.148–56)

Or think of Thucydides’ image of Pericles (2.65), one who possesses the authority needed to check or stimulate the passions of the Athenians depending on what was called for by the circumstances, which corresponds in all essentials to Cicero’s image of the ideal Roman orator.<sup>5</sup> It would not be overly cynical of us to suspect an agenda here, perhaps one tainting nearly all of our sources, which were written exclusively from an elite perspective. We should be very careful about accepting it without reflection.

Let us take a closer look at Scott’s theory. One of the key ideas in his attack on ideology-based accounts of domination is that among the dominated there exists a “hidden transcript”, which is normally well concealed from the view of the dominant behind a screen of docility but stands in covert opposition to the “public transcript” constructed by the dominant ideology. In Scott’s quite plausible view,

5 Cic. *De orat.* 2.337; Morstein-Marx 2004, 62–67.

the dominated find it expedient, given the high cost and relative hopelessness of outright rebellion, to *pretend* to adhere to the self-legitimizing ideology of the dominant, to *hide* their alternative, resistant discourse in safe places, and thus to leave little trace of it in the historical record. Scott writes:

The goal of slaves and other subordinate groups, as they conduct their ideological and material resistance, is precisely to escape detection; to the extent that they achieve their goal, such activities do not appear in the archives. In this respect, subordinate groups are complicitous in contributing to a sanitized official transcript, for that is one way they cover their tracks.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, then, the dominated and dominant paradoxically collaborate to produce an “official transcript” that appears to legitimate the power structure on the surface, while below this surface mostly hidden acts of resistance (anonymous vandalism, sabotage, petty theft, work slowdowns, etc.) continue unabated as well as do also the “hidden transcripts”, by which the dominated among themselves nourish the flame of resistance that burns unabated in their hearts. So the historian or sociologist who scans the “official transcript” or the “archives” (more or less, the historical record) for signs of outright resistance among the oppressed will reap a disappointingly meager harvest; but this is about as convincing as asking the prisoners in the presence of the prison guards – or worse, asking the guards themselves – whether the prisoners are well treated. How and where to find the “hidden transcripts”, then – that is the challenge:

Short of actual rebellion, the great bulk of public events, and hence the great bulk of the archives, is consecrated to the official transcript. And on those occasions when subordinate groups do put in an appearance, their presence, motives, and behavior are mediated by the interpretation of dominant elites... Acts of desperation, revolt, and defiance can offer us something of a window on the hidden transcript, but, short of crises, we are apt to see subordinate groups on their best behavior. Detecting resistance among slaves under “normal” conditions, then, would seem rather like detecting the passage of subatomic particles by cloud chamber. Only the trail of resistance – for example, so much corn missing – would be apparent.<sup>7</sup>

This is a powerful complex of ideas. Like many important theoretical insights, it expresses an important truth in relatively pure form – and in so doing, for clarity’s sake, suppresses other countervailing truths. All in all, Scott’s arguments against Gramscian “cultural hegemony” or comparable neo-Marxist theoretical positions serve more as a warning than a refutation. There are numerous cogent objections to applying Scott’s theory across the board as a paradigm for the operation of power structures. In a stimulating paper based on field work among an indigenous people of southern Chile who faced the prospect of their forced displacement to make room for a hydroelectric dam, the young anthropologist Robert Fletcher defends both “thick” and “thin” versions of Gramscian “cultural hegemony” against Scott, pointing out that the widely divergent responses of individuals and groups among the Pewenche to their forced migration – divergences traceable to factors such as experience of the outer world, access to information, and so on – reveal the weakness of Scott’s fundamental assumption that the dominated are on

6 Scott 1990, 87.

7 Ibid. 87.

the whole made up of clear-eyed autonomous “rational actors”, who see right through the elite’s symbolic attempts to justify and legitimate their domination and understand all forms of domination for what they are.<sup>8</sup>

Another weighty challenge comes from the political theorist David Beetham, who points out trenchantly that to focus exclusively on sheer intimidation and coercion to explain the perpetuation of power structures is to “make a prison regime into the paradigm case of power.”<sup>9</sup> Beetham stresses plausibly that

the more that a power structure is dependent on those subordinate to it for the achievement of its purposes, and especially where the quality of their performance matters, the more essential is it that the relationship is constructed according to an acknowledgment of reciprocal rights and duties such as only a principle of legitimacy can provide.<sup>10</sup>

A prison camp will presumably not normally enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of its inmates; but a civic regime in which citizens decide important aspects of their political life by means of the vote and may be called upon to defend their community with their lives is something very different. Indeed, Beetham persuasively argues that in any system *but* the starkest forms of domination “quality of performance” by subordinates does matter, which means that to a greater or lesser extent their voluntary assent and willing participation must be obtained and maintained through processes of legitimation. Coercion and intimidation alone simply cannot suffice to maintain complex social organizations above the level of the slave- or prison-camp, much less assure their success and perpetuation over centuries. In fairness, one might wonder whether Scott truly intended his theory to be applied to civic regimes, although it must be said that he does little to caution his readers against making this move.<sup>11</sup>

8 Fletcher 2001. See also Fletcher’s introduction to Fletcher 2007, vii–xxv. Lukes 2005, 124–34 also offers useful criticism of Scott along similar lines.

9 Beetham 1991, 27–33, at 27; Beetham 2001 is directly now explicitly against Scott. Note that Beetham is himself critical of the “dominant ideology” theory (see e.g. Beetham 1991, 34–35, 62, 104–108). In his view, unequal power structures are perpetuated not so much because elites “hoodwink” subordinates regarding their true interest but because power structures create their own (apparent) legitimacy in subtle and “misrecognized” ways: for example, Roman nobles are normally seen to be obviously the best qualified members of the *res publica* to serve the common interest *because* of their education, political experience and palpable “incorporation” of Roman ideals such as *virtus* – all of these being, of course, products of the power structure as well as factors serving to legitimate and thus to perpetuate it.

10 Beetham 2001, 109. For Beetham, subordinates are not simply calculating “rational agents” but “are also moral agents, who recognise the validity of rules, have some notion of a common interest and acknowledge the binding force of promises they have made – all elements involved in legitimate power” (Beetham 1991, 27).

11 Scott 1990, 193 apparently demarcates the domain of his theory as “only ... those situations in which it is assumed that most subordinates conform and obey *not* [my emphasis] because they have internalized the norms of the dominant, but because a structure of surveillance, reward, and punishment makes it prudent for them to comply,” and follows this by naming specifically “slavery, serfdom, caste domination, and ... those peasant-landlord relations in which appropriation and status-degradation are joined” as well as “in certain institutional settings between wardens and prisoners, staff and mental patients, teachers and students, bosses

For these reasons one must use care and discrimination when applying Scott's theory to the Roman Republic. The Republic demanded much of its citizens, and "quality of performance" – especially in the area of military service, but I would also argue in its civic structures such as elections and other votes – did matter greatly. Nor can it very plausibly be claimed that, in a system in which the *populus* had a vote, and not infrequently voted *against* a fairly uniform consensus among senators,<sup>12</sup> ordinary Roman citizens were forced by "relations of discipline and punishment" to suppress their real views and aspirations into a hidden sphere of "infrapolitics" while kow-towing publicly to the wishes of their "masters". Still, it seems reasonable to suppose that even in a civic political system, the unequal division of power produces versions – greater or lesser – of those forces that Scott has described in an extreme form. I suggest that as long as we avoid the temptations of totalizing theory, we can learn much from Scott's fundamental ideas: that an oppositional ideology might be nurtured covertly behind a placid facade of deference and acquiescence, which is intended as a screen; that the sociologist, political scientist or historian should not be fooled by such subservient performances, which do not fully persuade even the dominant though they may try to persuade themselves; and that precious insight into the world behind that screen can be won by careful study of those moments when favorable circumstances provide some protection for revelation of the "hidden transcript" of dominated or subordinate groups.

The content of "hidden transcripts" is, of course, normally precisely that – hidden. However, accident or favorable conditions (short of open revolt) that protect the bearer of a normally "hidden transcript" may give brief and partial glimpses of its content, which for all that are especially precious to the historian. Among such conditions reviewed by Scott is anonymity, often the anonymity provided by the cover of night; and one particularly explicit kind of revelation of the "hidden transcript" is by popular graffiti.<sup>13</sup> If we are to find a "hidden transcript" of resistance in republican Rome at all, this is the place to look. Unfortunately, the evidence for political graffiti in Rome is surprisingly scarce; even the rather active graffiti-culture that can be observed in Neronian and Flavian Pompeii contains remarkably little explicit reference to larger political issues beyond electoral endorsements.<sup>14</sup> Yet a close look at a few important cases known from the literary evidence suggests that the phenomenon was much more pervasive than the few

and workers." The implied contrast with civic regimes (cf. also p. 199) not only raises doubts about the theory's application to them but prompts reflection whether Scott would in fact accept a Gramscian dynamic in less starkly oppressive power-structures than those in which he is most interested. Cf. also Lukes 2005, 127–28.

12 Yakobson 2006.

13 Graffiti is surprisingly absent from Scott's study, if I am not mistaken. On the cover of night see Scott 1990, 121, 123, 149, 190.

14 *CIL* IV, with supplements. Franklin 2007 is a good introduction to the major categories of Pompeian epigraphy. Harris 1989, 259–64 offers an interesting review of the evidence with an eye to assessing the extent of literacy, but it must be noted that many are not nearly so pessimistic: see Franklin 1991 and Milnor 2009; also, more generally, Woolf 2009.

references in our sources would appear to indicate, and the individual instances turn out upon examination to be quite rich in implications.

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A fairly clear example of the revelation of a “hidden transcript” through graffiti comes from the immediate aftermath of the killing of Gaius Gracchus and Fulvius Flaccus and the slaughter of thousands of their supporters during and after the battle on the Aventine Hill unleashed by the first Emergency Decree of the Senate in 121 BC. After the bloodshed was over, the city was purified and the Senate decreed that the consul Lucius Opimius should see to the construction of a new Temple of Concordia overseeing the Forum at the foot of the Capitol.<sup>15</sup> Plutarch says that this provoked outrage among the people, “since he [Opimius] appeared to be puffing himself up proudly and even in a way celebrating a triumph over the slaughter of so many citizens.”<sup>16</sup> The complaint is particularly pointed for two reasons. Temples *were* in fact most frequently built as a kind of memorial of military triumph – technically, as the fulfillment of a vow made by a victorious commander – and such temples, sometimes partially funded by the general’s share of the spoils (*manubiae*), embodied and perpetuated his *gloria*.<sup>17</sup> This Opimius’ Temple of Concordia certainly did – for the likes of Cicero, at any rate.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, the choice of deity was both urgently apposite and brazenly tendentious. Concordia in the Forum had, it seems, traditionally been associated with patrician or senatorial concessions to plebeian demands for their rights; with the construction of Opimius’ temple, “Concord” was well on its way to the conservative slogan we pick up in Sallust recommending plebeian deference and justifying harsh repressive action.<sup>19</sup> We could therefore infer that the monument was a sharply contested site of contemporary reflection on the meaning of the recent trauma even if Plutarch did not provide us with a precious reference to the popular response to the construction of the temple. The biographer writes that this purely symbolic action by Opimius outraged “the multitude” (τοὺς πολλοὺς) far more than any of the concrete outrages he has just enumerated – more, that is, than the fact that Gaius’ head had been hunted, weighed and paid for in gold, that his body

15 App. *BCiv.* 1.26/120: ἐγείραι. I infer that Opimius was instructed to let the contract (cf. Orlin 1997, 139–161).

16 Plut. *C. Gracch.* 17.8–9.

17 Orlin 1997.

18 Cic. *Sest.* 140: *cuius* [sc. *Opimi*] *monumentum celeberrimum in foro*. Opimius did in fact have a recent military victory in hand, and had not the Gracchan crisis supervened, he might have taken the opportunity as consul to press for a temple – perhaps indeed of Concordia – to commemorate his suppression of the revolt of Fregellae as praetor four years before. (For a consul taking action on a vow undertaken as praetor, cf. e.g. Livy 31.21.12; 34.53.7; the most recent temple of Concordia in Rome, that on the Arx, was occasioned by a military mutiny: Livy 22.33.8).

19 Morstein-Marx 2004, 54–56, 102–103, 268–69; see also Döbler 1999, 48–61. Add Aug. *civ.* 3.25, who despite some factual imprecision hits the ideological nail on the head.

and those of the others killed in the battle were denied burial and thrown into the Tiber, that their widows were forbidden to mourn, and that the young son of Gaius' ally Fulvius, who had acted as an emissary, was thrown into prison by Opimius and ordered to kill himself after the fighting was over. More than all of this, then, did Opimius' triumphant appeal to Concordia in the Forum anger the People: "So at night some people wrote in below the dedicatory inscription of the temple this line: 'an act of madness made the Temple of Concordia'."<sup>20</sup>

This modest little event, noted only by Plutarch, is interesting from various points of view, some of which I have explored elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> What is of special interest to me here is how well this case fits Scott's conception of the revelation of a "hidden transcript" – by its nature, an extremely rare phenomenon. We must take careful note of a few important things. First, the message itself is an extremely pointed rebuttal of what must have been the "official" senatorial version of the violence, in a form that neatly parodies the standard dedicatory formula for temples. And while Plutarch (or presumably his source) apparently does not know or perhaps care about the precise identity of the graffitists, he does regard it as transparently a "popular" manifestation, an unproblematic expression of the view of the many (οἱ πολλοί).<sup>22</sup> Finally, Plutarch explicitly specifies that the act took place at night, as did our later, anti-Caesarian examples: as we saw, nocturnal cover is precisely one of the protected conditions under which, according to Scott, the "hidden transcript" can rise to the speciously calm surface of public discourse.<sup>23</sup> All of this suggests that this is an example of relatively autonomous means of communication by the Roman *plebs*, beyond the shouts and murmuring in the *contio* prompted and often manipulated by elite speakers, and one that demonstrates the possibility of taking the initiative in communication and declaring sharp dissent from the "public transcript", the "dominant discourse". Now, the *need* for a protected condition for the revelation of a "hidden transcript" is also in itself notable – a sign that even in this civic order there were times in which relations between *senatus* and *populus* approached the level of sheer domination that is Scott's subject. The aftermath of the trauma of 121 BC was evidently such a time. Still, this must be viewed as an exceptionally repressive moment; possibly in more normal times there was less of a need to hide the "transcript".

For whom was the Concordia-graffiti intended? Probably more than one audience; certainly, it was going to be read by more than one audience. It would be hard to deny that in large part the protest was directed "upward" toward the political elite: a warning, an expression of popular anger, a kind of retaliation – the

20 Plut. *C. Gracch.* 17.9: ἔργον ἀπονοίας ναὸν ὁμονοίας ἐποίηι. I emend the ms. ποιεῖ in order to bring out the apparent parody of the dedicatory formula *fecit*, normally rendered in the imperfect in Greek. For a guess as to the Latin original see Morstein-Marx 2004, 102–103, n. 159.

21 See above, n. 20.

22 Plut. *C. Gracch.* 17.8: ἠγίασε τοὺς πολλοὺς; 18.2: μισούμενος...ὕπὸ τοῦ δήμου.

23 For the Caesarian examples see below, n. 55. Of course, political graffiti was not the only sort protected by night: cf. Lucian, *dial. meretr.* 308. Some even of the semi-authorized Pompeian *dipinti* were apparently painted at night: see below, n. 29.



only one possible at the moment. Yet we should also consider the fact that many common denizens of the Forum must have rejoiced in their hearts as they cast their eyes upon this graffiti early that morning. (Those who could not read surely wasted no time in learning its meaning from others who could: for the purpose of reading the relatively simple and brief messages that form most of our examples, the controversy over the extent of literacy in Rome is largely beside the point.)<sup>24</sup> That is, another direction in which this kind of communication moves is “outward”, to other citizens, the “multitude” in fact, in this case assuring individual members of the *plebs* who feel aggrieved but silenced that their sense of outrage is shared by others and thereby nurturing the spirit of resistance.<sup>25</sup> Scott stresses the typical efforts of the dominant “to atomize subordinates by removing or penetrating any autonomous domain of communication;”<sup>26</sup> public graffiti such as this punctures the walls that separate “atomized subordinates” and must contribute to a sense of solidarity among them, while still remaining anonymous and its authors “protected” in Scott’s sense. It therefore constitutes an interesting mid-point between the ordinary, quotidian “infrapolitics” of evasive non-compliance that Scott has so brilliantly analyzed and the electrifying public avowal of the “hidden transcript” that the dominant cannot fail to recognize as anything short of revolt. From this perspective it is easy to see why the graffiti on the Temple of Concordia was no trivial matter.

Now that we have considered my first example it may be helpful to try to envision more precisely the type of graffiti under discussion here. “Graffiti” turns out to be a rather broad word. Our cases are not actually graffiti in the narrowest sense preferred by archaeologists, that is, writings or pictures scratched into a wall or other inviting surface with a stylus (*graphium*) or other sharp object. The familiar examples from Pompeii are far from political and (except for the interesting quotations and parodies of poetry) more akin to modern doodles and bathroom scrawlings than to our messages; such scratches are anyway barely visible from a distance of more than a few meters away, while our examples, like the modern “Yankee Go Home”, had to be conspicuous to do their work. On the other hand, the painted notices at Pompeii (*dipinti*) are overwhelmingly either electoral recommendations or publicity for gladiatorial spectacles and other semi-official postings.<sup>27</sup> A handful of tomb-inscriptions from the city of Rome offer intriguing

24 Suet. *Iul.* 80.3 gives a single counterexample of a more complex text. “Alphabétisation pauvre, largement répandue” (Corbier 1987, 59) is all that was necessary for understanding such messages. See also above, n. 14.

25 On the pragmatic role of the “hidden transcript” in sustaining resistance see Scott 1990, esp. 187–192, on its need for a “public” see *ibid.* 118–119. “Common knowledge”, a concept to be introduced below, is highly relevant here.

26 Scott 1990, 127–128.

27 *CIL* IV with supplements. Canali and Cavallo 2001 offer a useful collection of informal Latin graffiti, including examples from Rome (see also Della Corte 1933). Mouritsen 1988 is the most recent broad study of the electoral notices (see also Laurence 2007, 54–60, 109–113); his “elitist” interpretation is challenged by Biundo 1996 and esp. 2003 (cf. also Mouritsen 1999).

evidence that the practice of covering attractive surfaces with electoral endorsements existed in the Urbs and other towns of Italy as well as at Pompeii, but still this is not exactly the kind of graffiti we are looking at.<sup>28</sup> True, the Pompeian examples may often have been painted at night, and perhaps without the authorization of the owners of the street-front;<sup>29</sup> but with their frequently careful execution and often open attribution of the *scriptor* (with more than a hint of professional pride), they are hardly the stuff of subversive “street communication”, whose messages presumably needed to be written fairly quickly and furtively. More relevant to our cases is a tantalizing graffito scratched probably in 52 BC or very soon thereafter into the wall over an entrance to the theater at Tarracina, which appears to lament the death of Publius Clodius; revelation of a “hidden transcript” this may be, but again, like other incised graffiti, this text seems too inconspicuous to thrust itself upon the attention of the entire citizenry in the way that our examples must have done.<sup>30</sup>

It seems then that we have no exact parallels for our examples in the extant physical remains.<sup>31</sup> Of course, the odds are against the appearance and especially the survival of unauthorized and even subversive communication on public surfaces; only incised graffiti would be (more or less) indelible, but these were the least visible and therefore (to judge from extant examples) not used for communications of large importance. Our graffitists must have used a less permanent medium. As at least two literary references indicate, a simple piece of charcoal, which will have shown up very well on a travertine, marble or stuccoed surface, would have done very nicely.<sup>32</sup> No doubt some of the messages under consideration here may have been quickly and roughly painted, but the superior conven-

28 *CIL* VI 14313, 29942, 29943, 39094a (?), and the apparently still unpublished inscription from the Museo Nazionale cited by Panciera 1980, 1641 n. 17 (all Rome); V 1490 (Aquileia); IX 3331 (Superaequum); X 6193 (Formiae); XI 4126 (Narnia).

29 *CIL* IV 7621: *lanternari tene scalam*, and *CIL* IV 3884: *scr(ipsit) ... ad luna(m)*. Mouritsen 1988, 32 is skeptical of the nocturnal inference, but cf. Beard 2008, 79–80. The distribution of Pompeian *dipinti* gives reason to doubt whether they were authorized by the owners of the houses on whose walls they appeared (Mouritsen 1988, 58–59); but cf. Beard 2008, 189, who notes that unauthorized notices might well be painted over in the morning. Perhaps money changed hands. See also below, n. 34.

30 *AE* 1981, 190 = *CIL* I2 3109a-e; photograph in Solin 1981, pl. 15a. Height of letters: 5–12 mm. I incline toward Tatum’s interpretation (1990) of the text as pro-Clodian rather than the reverse (Solin). W.D. Lebek’s suggestion that “Publi” is nominative with elision of -us (Cugusi 1985, 27 n. 26; cf. Kühner-Holzweissig 1912, 441–442) produces a better construction than Solin’s vocative.

31 This is not simply a function of the non-survival of most republican walls and other surfaces: political graffiti are also literarily attested from the Principate (Suet. *Aug.* 70.2; *Nero* 45.2; *Dom.* 13.2; Dio 55.27.1; 61.16.2), but still do not survive (*CIL* IV 6893 and 8075 are unimpressive and anyway problematic cases).

32 Plaut. *Merc.* 409; Lucian, *dial. meretr.* 308, also under cover of night. As it happens, both passages refer to erotic messages written with charcoal, but that does not make political use of the same method any less likely. Graffiti written with charcoal are in fact known from Pompeii (the list given in *CIL* IV, p. 7 might be augmented with numerous examples published among the *graphio inscripta* in the Supplements).

ience and availability of charcoal would surely often have made it a more attractive option; and since paint could quite easily be painted over, it was little superior to charcoal for the purpose even as regards durability.<sup>33</sup>

The Concordia-graffito expressed sharp dissent from the dominant discourse and, one might suppose, sought to maintain a spirit of popular resistance against the senatorial perpetrators of a bloody crackdown. But another purpose of graffiti, as we learn again from Plutarch – and again from the Gracchan era – was actually to initiate political action “from below”. In his *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* Plutarch supplies an interesting review of conjectures as to why his protagonist was prompted to his momentous and ultimately fatal decision to take up the cause of land redistribution (8.6–10). The explanations range from the personal influence of the intellectuals Diophanes and Blossius (“as most say”) or of his mother Cornelia, to his personal rivalry with another young noble, Spurius Postumius, and his observation of the desolation of the Etrurian countryside as he travelled to Spain (as his brother Gaius claimed). But the stimulus to which Plutarch himself attributes the most influence is popular graffiti: “The People themselves (αὐτὸς ὁ δῆμος) set aflame his energy and ambition most of all”, he writes, “calling upon him by means of messages written on porticoes, walls and μνήματα [surely “tombs”, as usual in Plutarch] to reclaim the public land for the poor.”<sup>34</sup>

This is a different kind of graffiti from the example on the Temple of Concordia. This time ὁ δῆμος – and I see no reason to question Plutarch’s attribution to the People – employs it as a way of calling for political action from the elite rather than simply awaiting for initiative to be taken from above. Here, then, is a very clear example not only of popular communicative agency but even political agency, prompting activity by the elite in a way that we rarely get a chance to observe in our evidence. It is often stated that political initiative in the Roman Republic was the sole preserve of senators and thus that the citizenry only had a

33 Another practice closely akin to graffiti that is mentioned in our sources is the anonymous (probably usually nocturnal) posting and display of placards or the like, confusingly called in our sources *libelli* or βίβλια (Dio 55.27.1: [νύκτωρ]; Suet. *Iul.* 80.2; cf. Tac. *Ann.* 4.27.1, where *propalam* seems pointed and may mark an unusual lack of subterfuge). On the terms, see Harris 1989, 215 n. 207; Corbier 1987, 54; these are apparently to be distinguished by means of the verb *proponere*/ἐκτιθέναι from other kinds of usually slanderous *libelli*/βίβλια (see also below, n. 61).

34 Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 8.10, usually translated “monuments”, as in Perrin’s Loeb (which also envisions “posted writings”). Tombs lined the heavily-travelled entrances to Rome, esp. along the Appian Way, which made them an excellent posting-board (cf. the tomb of Obellius Firmus at Pompeii [de Caro 1979, 72–79], and the sepulchral texts cited above, n. 28). The “walls” are, of course, those fronting the streets: Mouritsen argues that at Pompeii “house façades were considered a part of the public street and were thus at the free disposal of scribes and scribblers of all kinds” (Mouritsen 1988, 59). The density of Pompeian *dipinti* appears generally to have been in direct proportion to the frequency of travel on the street: the notices were usually placed for maximal visibility, regardless of the identity or interests of the owners of the property on which they appeared (Mouritsen 1988, 50–56; Laurence 2007, 54–60, 109–113; but cf. Biundo 2003, 99–114, who articulates a more complex distribution pattern).

voice when a space for it was opened up by division among the elite.<sup>35</sup> But this example shows that to attribute political initiative solely to magistrates and the Senate is to take too formal a view: the *populus* had ways of making their desires known, though these generally fall beneath the purview of our sources. Graffiti were evidently one of these methods, and the matter-of-fact way in which Plutarch introduces this idea gives reason to wonder whether it was a much more common phenomenon of “lower-class” public life than the scarcity of references in our sources might suggest. It is worth reflecting that even Plutarch would surely never have mentioned this example had it not been for its biographical interest.

Plutarch is concerned with the graffiti only because of its motivational effect upon Gracchus. But we are not forced to adopt such a narrow perspective. Let us recall that on Plutarch’s own showing the agrarian problem in itself was already of long standing and well known: C. Laelius had considered dealing with it probably as consul in 140 BC (if not earlier) but had refrained after the opposition of the powerful raised fears of a crisis.<sup>36</sup> Its mere existence, then, was not news to Gracchus. If the graffiti did indeed have such a great effect on him as Plutarch claims, then it must have been in good part because it encouraged him to think that sufficiently powerful popular support could be mobilized to overcome the opposition of the powerful that had stopped Laelius in his tracks. This impression would no doubt have come in good part, as Plutarch suggests, from the mere quantity of the graffiti: “on porticoes, walls and tombs” suggests a lot of writing, giving the impression at least of a lot of people doing the writing. But we should remember that, like the Concordia example, graffiti is directed at all viewers, “outward” to other citizens who may share the aims of the graffitists as well as “upward”. In this case, Gracchus, or perhaps more likely, the tribunes collectively<sup>37</sup> were not the only ones prompted to act; so were all plebeians, or at least all the “poor”.

Michael Chwe, a young political scientist specializing in game theory, has written a very interesting book called *Rational Ritual*, in which he tries to bridge the gap between economic and cultural models of human action. His objective is to show that many cultural rituals (from royal progresses to television advertising at major sports events) can be explained as mechanisms for the production of what game-theorists call “common knowledge” – a technical term more specific than the ordinary-language meaning of the phrase. Groups of people resolved on collective action and thus already motivated to act on a basic level, still face what rational-choice theory calls a “coordination problem”, i.e. how to bring it about that those who desire to participate in a collective action (e.g. a demonstration)

35 See esp. North 1990, 18: “The popular will of the Roman people found expression in the context, and only in the context, of divisions within the oligarchy,” on which cf. Morstein-Marx 2004, 282–283.

36 Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 8.5: ἀντικρουσάντων δὲ τῶν δυνατῶν φοβηθεὶς τὸν θόρυβον (...). For the date see Stockton 1979, 33, n. 46.

37 προκαλούμενος ... αὐτόν seems to suggest that Tiberius was personally named in the graffiti, though possibly it refers more to the writings’ emotional effect upon Plutarch’s protagonist than to their explicit phrasing.

can successfully *coordinate* that action. Obviously, if you are planning a demonstration, you do not want to be the only one to show up: you want to know in advance that others are intending to turn up too. But they too are in a similar position: everybody needs not only to get the message (so to speak) but also to know that a sufficient number of others have also gotten the (same) message. Thus for the demonstration to be successfully coordinated, “common knowledge” of the plans needs to be generated in advance: most effectively by face-to-face meeting, or a series of interlinked face-to-face meetings, or by some other form of communication (such as a mass e-mail or “tweets”) that not only transmits content but also gives all its recipients the crucial knowledge that a sufficient number of others are also getting the message simultaneously. The *lack* of “common knowledge” in this sense is of great importance in maintaining systems of domination – which is precisely why oppressive or tyrannical regimes attempt to minimize the opportunities for groups of subjects to meet without surveillance (or today, to communicate electronically).<sup>38</sup> Consider, for example, the “paradox of the hated dictator”: a cruel and odious tyrant could theoretically be assassinated by any number of his bodyguards and attendants if they only knew that enough others would join in; but since none of the potential tyrannicides can communicate openly with any of the others, the tyrant lives on and maintains his domination, protected not so much by his bodyguard as by a pathology of communication which precludes “common knowledge”.<sup>39</sup>

This consideration invites us to attend particularly closely to communicative acts that help to generate (democratic) “common knowledge”, and I would like to suggest that the Gracchus story gives an intriguing and eye-opening example of such a communicative act arising “from below”. Pre-modern technologies for creating “common knowledge” were heavily dependent on face-to-face meetings, such as especially the *contio*; but graffiti would seem to be an important alternative, and about the only one available to non-elites.<sup>40</sup>

I began this paper by noting that a good deal of communicative interaction in both directions must already have taken place before a magistrate promulgated a legislative proposal in a *contio*. We are extremely ill-informed about the form this communication took, but I suggest that Plutarch’s information about the graffiti that prompted Tiberius Gracchus to act opens a small window onto that problem – affording only a narrow view, to be sure, but a precious one that helps to put some concrete materiality behind rather vague abstractions like “face-to-face society” or

38 Chwe 2001, 24, citing Scott. This is not to say that “common knowledge” is always liberating. Chwe’s royal progresses, or his analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon* (1787), can be cited for the contrary proposition that “common knowledge” may in fact encourage acquiescence or reinforce oppressive conformity and “groupthink”. The point is rather that since effective resistance to domination does require solution of a coordination problem, this will rest upon prior generation of “common knowledge” among a sufficient group of resisters. For criticism of the varied ways in which Chwe uses the term “common knowledge” see Wedeen 2002, 718–719.

39 Lovett 2007, 716, with Machiavelli, *Prince*, ch. 19.

40 Chwe 2001, 10 mentions graffiti in passing.

“bilateral resonance” between Senate and People.<sup>41</sup> In this case, popular graffiti communicated not only to Tiberius Gracchus the readiness of at least an active element of the urban *plebs* to support a proposal for agrarian distribution (communication “upward”) but also enhanced the likelihood of its success by making a public appeal that virtually all the inhabitants of central Rome would observe (communication “outward”), thus heightening their anticipation and helping to ensure that the unveiling of the proposal in Gracchus’ first *contio* would be the resounding success necessary to sweep all elite resistance before it. In both respects, the graffiti generated “common knowledge” in Chwe’s sense, that is, the prior understanding needed to coordinate collective action, although in this case it does so in a somewhat complicated way inasmuch as the communicative act has two (main) audiences: the magistrate, whose formal initiative was required and was thus ostensibly prompted, and the potential supporters of the proposal.

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We have looked at one example of graffiti as “hidden transcript”, another as a prompt to political action and generator of “common knowledge”. We move now to an example of a complex and fairly extensive graffiti “campaign” that manifests both of these elements – and is well known among modern audiences because of the cultural authority of William Shakespeare.

Most of our major sources for the conspiracy against Julius Caesar in 44 BC note that certain writings, produced in secret at night and revealed in public places in the day, played a key role in prompting Marcus Brutus to fall in with the plot. Plutarch, who as a biographer is particularly interested in the motives which led the young Brutus to kill his friend and benefactor, gives the fullest information, which is, however, largely corroborated by others. The facts appear to be these: On the Capitol among the group of statues of the Seven Kings in front of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus there stood, providing a kind of closure to the royal group, an image of Lucius Brutus, who according to tradition had expelled the Tarquin dynasty and became the first consul of the Republic.<sup>42</sup> Plutarch interestingly claims that Brutus was depicted holding a drawn sword, which is not easy to explain, since he was no tyrant-slayer in the strict sense; perhaps he had been assimilated to the Greek vision of the tyrannicide, or perhaps someone in the chain of transmission mistook the dagger (*culter*) Brutus had pulled from Lucretia’s breast for a tyrannicide’s “drawn sword”.<sup>43</sup> However that may be, early in

41 “Bilateral resonance”: Laser 1997, 231–241. Laurence 1994 interestingly explores the possible use of client-networks by politicians to control information in the city, but he does not take up the equally interesting question regarding the reverse route of communication.

42 For the statues see Weinstock 1971, 145–146 (Brutus); Evans 1990; Sehlmeier 1999, 68–74; Coarelli 1999; Cadario 2006, 38–41. Their dates are commonly placed within a few decades of 300, but Weinstock is inclined to put the statue of Brutus at least as late as the mid-second century.

43 Plut. *Brut.* 1.1: ἐσπασμένον ξίφος. Its existence is doubted by Sehlmeier 1999, 73, though on insufficient grounds: the comment need not depend on autopsy to be true. Weinstock

44 BC, and probably on more than one occasion (to judge from Plutarch's use of the imperfect tense), the base of this image was tagged with graffiti which read "If only you now lived, Brutus" and "If only Brutus were alive".<sup>44</sup>

But, of course, a Brutus *was* alive, the young protégé of Cicero pardoned by Caesar after the civil wars and given the prestigious Urban Praetorship for this very year, so in fact the graffiti on the base of the statue was simultaneously a lament and a shaming exhortation: if Marcus Brutus were truly a Brutus, he would emulate the spirit of his ancient ancestor. The corollary was, of course, that Marcus Brutus was actually *not* a descendant of Lucius as his clan always claimed, and indeed one version of the incident says that further graffiti declared explicitly that "Your descendants are unworthy of you", and even "You [now addressing the living Brutus] are no descendant of *him*."<sup>45</sup> The accusation is especially neat in this particular location, since the statue was itself a kind of touchstone of Brutan identity by the late Republic. Descent of living Bruti from the Father of the Republic was challenged by malicious souls who inconveniently pointed out that since Lucius Brutus had executed *both* his sons, his blood-line ended there.<sup>46</sup> But the statue itself was adduced by the Bruti of the late Republic as evidence, for Plutarch tells us on the authority of Posidonius that they used to point to the similarity between the statue's features and their own to substantiate their claim to be descended from the First Consul of Rome.<sup>47</sup>

Suetonius intriguingly adds another, otherwise unattested graffito in this connection, a couplet inscribed on the base of a statue of Caesar himself, as follows:

*Brutus, quia reges eiecit, consul primus factus est;*  
*Hic, quia consules eiecit, rex postremo factus est.*  
 Brutus became the first consul, since he had expelled the kings;  
 This man at last became king, since he had expelled the consuls.<sup>48</sup>

Which statue of Caesar? One plausible candidate would be one of the two (or even three) statues of Caesar now atop the relocated and rebuilt Rostra in the Fo-

1971, 146 argues for assimilation to the Athenian tyrannicide-model; Welwei 2000, 53, and Walter 2004, 145 assume that the sword functioned simply as a symbol (of the struggle for freedom, of the expulsion of the tyrant) rather than as a specific referent to an object in the tradition.

44 Plut. *Brut.* 9.6: ἐπέγραφοι; Dio 44.12.3 and Appian *BCiv.* 2.112/469 provide close echoes of the phrases, and Suet. *Iul.* 80.3 probably preserves the original of the first (*utinam viveres!*). I infer from Suetonius' verb (*subscribere ... statuae*) that the graffito was written on the statue-base. This certainly seems the easiest and quickest method of applying a message to a statue, but one could instead hang or affix a *titulus* on it (Dio 61.16.2a; Suet. *Nero* 45.2).

45 App. *BCiv.* 2.112/469, where σου and τοῦδε seem to require their placement in the immediate proximity of Lucius' statue rather than Marcus' tribunal in the Forum.

46 Plut. *Brut.* 1; Dio 44.12.1. Presumably the genealogical monograph commissioned by M. Brutus from Atticus (Nepos *Att.* 18.3) was intended to refute this argument – and proves that it was contemporary. Brutus had himself made clear reference to his ancestry on his coins of c. 54: Crawford 1974, no. 433/1–2.

47 Plut. *Brut.* 1.8.

48 Suet. *Iul.* 80.3.

rum below, completed and dedicated by Mark Antony as consul early in 44 BC.<sup>49</sup> These were new, and part of a new monument at the focal point of the Forum; and as we shall see, these statues too were also implicated in this symbolic battle in another way. But another new statue of Caesar is a more compelling candidate. Suetonius' wording, in which "some people" were responsible for tagging *both* Brutus' and Caesar's statue (without further specification), suggests that we should look somewhere near the group of the Liberator and the Kings; and in fact, we learn from Dio that at the end of 45 BC, "they" – in this context, no doubt at least formally the Senate and People – had set up a statue of Caesar *next to* the statues of the Kings and Lucius Brutus.<sup>50</sup> Dio adds that *this* is what especially spurred Marcus Brutus on to plot against Caesar, a comment that implicitly brings this statue into precisely the context we have been exploring, while Cicero alludes in a speech delivered before Caesar himself to the indignation the statue aroused among some.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, this is the spot where the contrast between Lucius Brutus and Caesar proposed by the graffiti would be reinforced by the direct confrontation of the two men's images – a confrontation especially charged if we accept Weinstock's plausible suggestion that Caesar was being paired with Brutus as a Liberator.<sup>52</sup> Suetonius' couplet contrasting Brutus and Caesar as, in effect, *termini* of the Republic can attractively be seen as a commentary on the arrival of the new statue of Caesar beside those of Lucius Brutus and the Kings.

The graffiti on the base of Lucius Brutus' statue necessarily brought Marcus Brutus into the picture. But even if the reference to the living Brutus remained only implicit on the basis of the graffiti on the statue-base, other messages pressed the connection overtly. More than once (it seems), Romans woke up to find the tribunal and seat in the Forum where Marcus held court as Urban Praetor<sup>53</sup> "covered" with phrases such as "Brutus, are you asleep?", "Brutus, are you dead?", "Brutus, have you been bribed?", and (now in an explicit denial of the bloodline) "You are not a true Brutus".<sup>54</sup> Our sources explicitly state that, as we saw also in

49 Sehlmeier 1999, 231–234; Cadario 2006, 51–55. See esp. Dio 44.4.5 (cf. 43.49.1). Zanker 2009 offers a convenient survey of the late Caesarian statues.

50 Dio 43.45.4; Sehlmeier 1999, 229–230.

51 Cic. *Deiot.* 33: 'ad regem', inquit, 'scribere solebat te in invidia esse, tyrannum existimari, statua inter reges posita animos hominum vehementer offensos, plaudi tibi non solere.' Cicero here is at pains to undercut this hostile line of argument, but still serves as testimony of its currency and importance.

52 Weinstock 1971, 145–147.

53 It may be that by this date a permanent stone structure in the Forum had replaced the traditional wooden praetorian tribunals of the past; this might explain how a *sella* can also be written on in the night. But the precise location of the Urban Praetor's tribunal, if it was indeed fixed at this time, remains unclear and disputed: cf. Coarelli 1985, 166–199; David 1992, 17–18; Korhonen 1999, and Verduchi 1999. Cic. *Verr.* 2.3.77 describes erotic graffiti written apparently on a surface above Verres' tribunal in Sicily.

54 Plut. *Brut.* 9.7; *Caes.* 62.7 (note again the imperfect tense in both places); App. *BCiv.* 2.112/469; Dio 44.12.3. As C. Pelling notes in his forthcoming commentary to Plut. *Caes.*, it is unclear whether these phrases are meant to be declarations or questions. This matters little for our purposes, though I think  $\nu\epsilon\kappa\pi\omicron\varsigma \epsilon\hat{\iota}$  works better as a question. Pelling gives interesting



the older case of the Temple of Concordia, these graffiti too were written in the night, which had surely also given the necessary cover to the “taggers” on the Capitol, an extremely conspicuous location.<sup>55</sup>

An amusing side-issue is the modern reception of these writings in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. There, we recall, they are described of as “papers” laid in Brutus’ chair, “set ... up with wax upon old Brutus’ statue” and indeed finally able to be “throw[n] ... in at his window”:<sup>56</sup>

“Brutus, thou sleep’st. Awake, and see thyself!”  
 “Shall Rome, et cetera. Speak, strike, redress!”  
 “Brutus, thou sleep’st. Awake!”  
 Such instigations have been often dropped  
 Where I have took them up.<sup>57</sup>

Now in fact Plutarch, Shakespeare’s source-text, is none too clear about the form these writings took in the two central passages of the *Brutus* and *Caesar*.<sup>58</sup> Shakespeare, however, was not reading Plutarch in Greek but in Sir Thomas North’s 1579 rendering, where the writings “cast ... into the Praetor’s seat” are described as “sundry papers”, “seditious bills” and “scrolls”, although North allows that someone wrote “under the image of L. Brutus”.<sup>59</sup> But don’t blame North: he was not translating the original Greek but the French version of Plutarch by Bishop Amyot of Auxerre published in 1559, where the misconception seems to originate.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps remembering their Shakespeare, modern translators into English have also often been tempted by the idea of scattering written notes around the seat and tribunal.<sup>61</sup> But a later analepsis in the *Brutus* (10.6) shows that Plutarch

parallels from Pompeii for “you are asleep!”/*dormis*. Of course, the messages on Brutus’ tribunal (and perhaps many of the Pompeian examples) were written while most people were asleep.

55 App. *BCiv.* 2.112/469: λάθρα; Plut. *Brut.* 9.7: εύρίσκετο μεθ’ ἡμέραν; *Caes.* 62.7: νύκτωρ δὲ κατεπίπλασαν.

56 I.3.142–46; cf. I.2.312–17 (below) and II.1.36ff. Is H. White’s odd Loeb translation of App. *BCiv.* 2.112/469 “affixed (cf. ἐπεγράφετο) to the statues of the elder Brutus” a Shakespeare-induced slip?

57 II.1.46–50.

58 Here Plutarch writes that the tribunal was “filled” with writings (*Caes.* 62.7: κατεπίπλασαν γραμμάτων; *Brut.* 9.7: ἀνάπλεων γραμμάτων), which might at first support the notion that notes were somehow posted or laid upon these objects. However, while forms of ἀναπιμπλῆναι refer to filling up or covering the available space on a surface, this may be with blood or blemishes and the like (cf. Plut. *Pomp.* 53.3; *Paul.* 22.7; *Dion* 34.3; *Mor.* 922a), so there is no hindrance to interpreting κατεπίπλασαν γραμμάτων / ἀνάπλεων γραμμάτων here as “covering something / something covered with writing”.

59 Spencer 1964, 84–85, 110, 112–113.

60 Amyot 1559/1784, 5.508 and 7.424, 425–426: “petits billets”, “escripteaux”. Note that Amyot’s translation of *Brut.* 10.6 quite obscures the meaning of τὸ βῆμα ... καταγράφειν.

61 “Laid papers about his chair of state” (Dryden); Rex Warner’s Penguin has “leave papers all over the platform”; B. Perrin for the Loeb translates “covered ... with writings”, which seems studiously ambiguous; R. Waterfield in the recent Oxford World’s Classics perhaps hedges with “left messages all over the rostra”. Even Sehlmeier 1999, 73 with n. 181 takes the messages as “Zettel” and even “Pamphlete”. True, another practice was the scattering of any-

knew very well that he meant that the tribunal was written *on* (τὸ βῆμα ... καταγράφειν), while Appian and Dio are even more unambiguous on the matter.<sup>62</sup>

There is some reason to believe that the anti-Caesarian graffiti-campaign was itself a direct *response* to an immediately prior incident, again involving the anonymous symbolic use of a statue in the night, which has a prominent role in all the ancient narratives of the prelude to the Ides of March. One morning in January, Romans awoke to discover that Caesar's statue on the newly rebuilt and relocated Rostra had been decorated secretly in the night with a diadem.<sup>63</sup> The tribunes Flavius and Marullus leapt into action, immediately taking down the royal symbol, imprisoning a man they claimed was the perpetrator and alleging, doubtless in a *contio*, that this was the wish of Caesar himself.<sup>64</sup> Now Plutarch refers to this incident as he rounds off the story of the anti-Caesarian graffiti in the *Brutus*, clearly placing the appearance of the diadem *prior* to the graffiti and linking the two events causally, for he writes that "the flatterers of Caesar" had placed diadems on Caesar's statues under cover of night, seeking thereby to "induce the multitude to address him as king rather than dictator," and that they were in this slightly indirect sense "responsible" (αἵτιοι τούτων) for the Brutus-graffiti.<sup>65</sup> Since Plutarch has made clear that in his view at least these "flatterers of Caesar" were *not* in fact the authors of the graffiti (who at *Brut.* 9.5 are οἱ πολῖται seeking

mous, defamatory *libelli* (e.g. Suet. *Aug.* 55), probably actually little more than notes (Harris 1989, 215 n. 207), and perhaps not unlike the "messages" which were sometimes "thrown" into enemy camps to sap morale (e.g. Dio 43.5.1–53, with Harris 1989, 253 n. 413); also placards could be posted to function in the manner of graffiti (see above, n. 33). (It is unclear to which of these practices Dio 44.12.1 and 43.47.6 refer.) But nothing suggests that this was what happened to Brutus' tribunal; indeed, Dio 44.12.1–3 distinguishes γράμματα ... πολλὰ ἐξετίθεσαν from the *writing on* the statue and tribunal.

62 App. *BCiv.* 2.112/469: ἐπεγράφετο; Dio 44.12.3: ἐπέγραψαν.

63 Dio 44.9.2–3; App. *BCiv.* 2.108/449; Plut. *Caes.* 61.8; *Brut.* 9.8; Nic. Dam. *FGrH* 90 F130.69. For identification of the statue as one of the two (or three?) images of Caesar on the new Rostra see Dio and Nic. Dam. (ll. 23–24) and Sehlmeier 1999, 231–234; only Plutarch uses the plural. The action took place "secretly" according to Dio (2) and Nic. Dam. (l. 29), on this point corroborating Plut. (*Brut.*) νύκτωρ, although the tribunes later claimed to have found the culprit (App.). The date was January, perhaps around the middle of the month: Suet. *Iul.* 79.1 gives Jan. 26, but as seems clear from Dio's and Appian's account, he has evidently conflated the incident with the later one of Caesar's return from the Latin festival. (The sequence of events given in Plut. *Caes.* 60–61 is obviously garbled.)

64 Dio 44.9.3: ἐπαινεσάντων αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ πλήθει ὡς μηδενὸς τοιοῦτου δεόμενον. Cf. App. *BCiv.* 2.108/449: ὑποκρινάμενοι τι καὶ τῷ Καίσαρι χαρίζεσθαι.

65 Plut. *Brut.* 9.8. Dio has a different view about the perpetrators of the diadem-incident (perhaps Appian, too): he claims that they were *agents provocateurs* within the conspiracy, apparently seeking to give public plausibility to the claim that Caesar was grasping at kingship and thus merited death. (This coincides too with Caesar's own accusation of the tribunes before the Senate: App. *BCiv.* 2.108/452; Nic. Dam. *FGrH* 90 F130.69.) However that may be, even that version implicitly agrees with Plutarch that the natural interpretation of the placement of the diadem was that it signified *support* of the monarchic title for Caesar, which is the key element in the causal link Plutarch makes.

to prompt Brutus to action *against* Caesar), he evidently means that they were “responsible” (αἵτιοι) in the sense of having unintentionally provoked the graffiti by decorating Caesar’s statue(s).

Chronology is not Plutarch’s strong suit.<sup>66</sup> Yet some notable points of contact between the two incidents make a causal link between them perfectly plausible. The diadem represented Caesar as king, while the graffito on his statue-base referred to his being “made king”. L. Brutus too features in the diadem-incident, for Plutarch writes that after the tribunes imprisoned the alleged culprit, “the People (ὁ δῆμος) followed them with applause, saluting them as ‘Brutuses’ because Brutus was the man who had ended the succession of kings and transferred the power of the monarchy to the Senate and People.”<sup>67</sup> This could be the moment that Dio mentions just before describing the graffiti, when people “kept continually calling upon him, crying out ‘Brutus, Brutus!’ and adding ‘we need (a) Brutus!’”<sup>68</sup> However that may be, the diadem-incident appears to have directly produced public invocations of the name of L. Brutus, which were echoed by the graffiti on his statue on the Capitol. On this hypothesis, the graffiti-campaign is drawn more tightly into a complex series of symbolic moves and counter-moves made anonymously in the chilly winter nights of early 44 BC.

So who were the perpetrators of the graffiti? Most scholars regard Caesar’s position with the Roman People as unassailable at this time; typical is the view that the *populus* did not care whether or not they had a *rex* or did not believe that Caesar was one, and the corollary that the conspirators were the victims of “wishful thinking” in supposing otherwise.<sup>69</sup> From this starting-point one would have to follow the cynical Shakespearean idea that the graffiti were actually produced by the conspirators themselves or like-minded members of the elite.<sup>70</sup> It is in the nature of the thing that one could never be sure, then or now, who the actual graffiti-tists were. However, it should be stressed that what we have seen of the tradition of political graffiti in republican Rome and the broad consensus of our sources on this particular instance converge to encourage us to see the anti-Caesarian graffiti of early 44 BC as also popular in origin.<sup>71</sup>

66 The incident of the diadem is wrongly placed after the Lupercalia at Plut. *Caes.* 61 (see n. 63).

67 Plut. *Caes.* 61.9. Later Caesar turns the appellation “Bruti” into an insult, thereby also insulting the People (τὸν δῆμον ἐφυβρίζων).

68 Dio 44.12.2: the subject seems to be οἱ πολλοί, but since this is picked up somewhat loosely from an earlier clause, it seems doubtful that he really means that “most people” cried out in this way. Still, the description suits crowd action, protected by a degree of anonymity; a senator is unlikely to have called attention to himself in this manner. Note Suet. *Iul.* 80.1: *populo ... clam palamque detrectante dominationem atque assertores flagitante.*

69 Wiseman 2009, 218–219; cf. e.g. Pina Polo 2006, 97; Woolf 2007, 34.

70 See above, n. 56. Shakespeare was presumably guided to this idea by Plut. *Brut.* 10.6, but the notion that the notes derived from the conspirators themselves and ultimately from Cassius is apparently his alone (Humphreys 1984, 127 ad 1.3.142–6).

71 Cf. Jehne 1987, 321–22, who accepts that the graffiti were at least in part authentic expressions of popular views, but resists attributing agency “rashly” and “one-sidedly” to the lower orders.

Our earlier examples, as we saw, are unambiguously identified by Plutarch as expressions of οἱ πολλοί or ὁ δῆμος. A wider range of sources presents the anti-Caesarian graffiti in exactly the same way, although there are one or two straws in the wind. Appian is quite explicit that the agents were ὁ δῆμος, while Suetonius lists the graffiti among a series of popular responses to Caesar's actions (placards, jingles, derisive shouts, and protest ballots) that exemplify how "not even the People were any longer pleased with the present situation but both privately and in public they objected to (his) domination and cried out for liberators."<sup>72</sup> In Plutarch, those who prompt Brutus by means of graffiti are described as οἱ πολῖται, "the citizens", and distinguished clearly from Brutus' personal friends and associates, who by contrast are able to approach him directly.<sup>73</sup> Only Dio may be thought to be a bit murky on the point, although his account too can be read in a manner consistent with Appian's, which in general it closely resembles; certainly, nothing he says contradicts the other sources.<sup>74</sup> True, in a closely parallel passage of Plutarch and Appian, Cassius is made to prod Brutus, who has not yet been moved by the graffiti to throw in his lot with the conspiracy, by asking rhetorically, "Do you really suppose that artisans and shopkeepers are writing anonymously on your tribunal and not the leading men of Rome?"<sup>75</sup> Since he has earlier stated that ὁ δῆμος was responsible for the graffiti, Appian at least makes tolerably clear that Cassius' assertion is in fact disingenuous, and Plutarch's version of the scene should probably be read in the same way. But in any case Cassius' very question itself implies that the natural assumption, and indeed Brutus' view up to this point, was that "artisans and shopkeepers" would be the agents of such graffiti. In other republican political contexts "artisans and shopkeepers" (*opifices et tabernarii*) and similar phrases typically denote the groups and crowds mobilized for violence or other pressure-tactics in the city of Rome, so it seems probable that these urban networks, which appear to have constituted the most politically active substratum of the urban populace, were also commonly understood to have sup-

72 App. *BCiv.* 2.112/469: ἐρεθιζόμενος καὶ ὄνειδιζόμενος μάλιστα ἐς τοῦτο ὑπὸ τοῦ δήμου; Suet. *Iul.* 80.1–3.

73 Plut. *Brut.* 9.5. and *Caes.* 62.7 is unfortunately vague, but note that οἱ πολλοί at 62.1 seem to be included in this group.

74 Dio 44.12.2–3 (see above, n. 68). Cf. App. *BCiv.* 2.112/469.

75 App. *BCiv.* 2.113/472: ἢ σοι δοκοῦσιν οἱ χειροτέχνη καὶ κάπηλοι καταγράφειν σου τὸ δικαστήριον ἀσήμως μᾶλλον ἢ οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι ἄριστοι; cf. Plut. *Brut.* 10.6: ἢ τὸ βῆμά σου δοκεῖς καταγράφειν τοὺς ὑφάντας καὶ τοὺς καπήλους, οὐχὶ τοὺς πρώτους καὶ κρατίστους ταῦτα ποιεῖν. The coincidence of Appian and Plutarch probably points as usual to their common use of Asinius Pollio, but given the private nature of this scene and its particular biographical interest one is entitled to wonder whether in fact Plutarch found the anecdote in the more personal accounts of Empylus, Brutus' orator-in-residence (Plut. *Brut.* 2.4), or of Brutus' step-son L. Bibulus (13.3), and Appian is only echoing him (Pelling 1979, 86–87, with J. Moles' suggestion cited in n. 86). Against this, however, might be raised the apparently greater accuracy of Appian's use of contemporary Roman political language: Plutarch's "weavers" seems out of place in urban Rome and looks like an unsuccessful stab at *opifices*.

plied our graffitists from among their numbers.<sup>76</sup> It is, of course, a truism that graffiti must in fact be written by individuals, and therefore that their representation of a wider collectivity might in principle always be questioned. Moreover, even though there is good reason to accept the broad consensus of our sources that the Caesarian graffiti were in fact popular in origin, it is also true that the protective screen that enabled the expression of these sentiments (i.e. night) also simultaneously created at least the potential for uncertainty (tendentious or otherwise) as to their authors. To that extent, Shakespeare illuminates a perfectly real interpretive problem at the heart of the anti-Caesarian graffiti campaign – one which in fact features, as we have seen, in a synoptic moment of the accounts of Plutarch and Appian.

If, then, as our sources indicate, the graffiti-campaign was actually popular in origin, this would cast the narrative of the assassination in a somewhat new light. In particular, we would need to come to grips with the idea that some significant element of popular opinion had turned hostile to Caesar by the end of 45 BC and early 44 BC.<sup>77</sup> That is in fact precisely what most of our sources say. We have already had occasion to quote Suetonius' assertion that at this point even the People had become alienated from Caesar and secretly and publicly began to call for liberators, with graffiti among other means. Plutarch says that Caesar's yearning for kingship gave even οἱ πολλοί their first cause for "open and deadly hatred" against him and stresses in particular the impact of his arbitrary punishment of the tribunes Flavius and Marullus.<sup>78</sup> Appian too describes a similar crisis of public support, as ὁ δῆμος is first deceived in their hope that Caesar would return the Republic to them, then "groans" when some address him as *rex* on his return from the Latin Festival, later applauds his refusal of the crown at the Lupercalia, and finally (as we have seen) provokes M. Brutus to act by means of the graffiti.<sup>79</sup> Dio is a little more vague about by whom precisely Caesar ends up being "bitterly hated",<sup>80</sup> but is quite explicit when he says that by his refusal to stand for an honorific senatorial delegation at the end of the year he "aroused such great anger in everyone, not only senators *but the rest too* [my emphasis], that he himself provided those who killed him with one of their best pretexts for a plot."<sup>81</sup> In view of our earlier conjecture that the graffiti-campaign was a response to the decoration of Caesar's statue(s) with a diadem, it is certainly tempting to take our cue from Plutarch and suppose that Caesar's removal of the two tribunes from office –

76 Cic. *Flac.* 18 and Morstein-Marx 2004, 128–129. Since the language of Appian so closely reflects contemporary Roman usage, it is reasonable to infer that his ultimate source was early and well-informed.

77 Cf. Jehne 1987, 304–26 for a thoughtful review of the evidence for the *plebs'* attitudes toward Caesar as dictator leading to a more complex picture than is usually drawn.

78 Plut. *Caes.* 60.1, 61, 62.1: οὕτω δὴ τρέπονται πρὸς Μάρκον Βρούτον οἱ πολλοί.

79 App. *BCiv.* 2.107–108/448–49, 108/450, 109/457–58, 112/469.

80 Dio 44.11.3: δεινῶς ἐμισήθη (cf. also 8.4: [sc. οἱ πολλοὶ] ἐμίσουν; 10.4 and 12.2 [n. 68]).

81 Dio 44.8.2: ὀργὴν ἐκ τούτου πᾶσιν, οὐχ ὅτι τοῖς βουλευταῖς ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις, τοσαύτην κτλ.; cf. Plut. *Caes.* 60.5: τοῦτ' οὐ μόνον ἠνίασε τὴν βουλήν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν δῆμον.

arguably a violation of their sacrosanctity, in whose name he had in fact embarked on a civil war – did indeed galvanize a spirit of resistance on “good” republican grounds among the urban *plebs*, who prized the traditions of this office in particular.<sup>82</sup>

None of this is to say, however, that our evidence of popular reactions to Caesar at this time is entirely unanimous. As a matter of fact, it certainly is not.<sup>83</sup> It is often tempting to attribute a single will to the countless minds that make up “the multitude”, but a moment’s reflection upon the absurdity of such an interpretive move encourages caution. Modern survey methods have allowed us to see that “public opinion” is a gross abstraction that tends to be shaped by the very methods used to measure it. And careful analysis of our sources’ habit of attributing unanimity to the Roman People or the urban *plebs* when this supports the interpretation they favor indicates that this is typically a rhetorical move driven by the tendentious aim to lend republican legitimacy to certain figures and divest their opponents of it.<sup>84</sup> The “fundamental indeterminacy of the Popular Will” prevailed no less before the trauma of Caesar’s assassination as after it.<sup>85</sup>

If the anti-Caesarian graffiti were in fact understood at the time to be the expression of views of an influential segment of the urban *plebs* (as *opifices et tabernarii* certainly were), then it becomes easier to understand the actions of the conspirators, who otherwise come off as having almost inexplicably misread the popular mood, projecting their own “wishful thinking” upon the People.<sup>86</sup> Roman senators’ success in general, and in this case (as they must have known) the conspirators’ very lives, depended on accurately reading the signs of the “judgment and will of the Roman People” (Cic. *Sest.* 106) in the dense network of communication that evidently characterized politics in the city of Rome. And one thing that

82 Appian too stresses the sharpening of anger against Caesar caused by this event: τὴν τε ὀργὴν ὀξεῖταιν ἐποίει (*BCiv.* 2.108/453). Caesar’s mode of proceeding is somewhat unclear: the sources generally present him as acting solely with the backing of a senatorial decree (esp. Dio 44.10.2–3; App. *BCiv.* 2.108/452; Nic. Dam. *FGrH* 90 F 130.69; cf. Vell. 2.68.4–5), but Dio 44.10.3 with Julius Obsequens 70 *may* suggest that formally the tribunes were deprived of their office by a Gracchan-style vote proposed by the tribune C. Helvius Cinna (Broughton 1952–84, 2.323). Under the circumstances, such a vote hardly seems to imply broad public support for the deposing of the tribunes. For the allegation that tribunician sacrosanctity was violated see App. *BCiv.* 2.108/453 and 138/575–76. At the consular elections some wrote the names of the deposed tribunes on their ballots (Dio 44.11.4; Suet. *Iul.* 79.3).

83 For instance, “some” at least address Caesar as *rex* on his return from the Latin festival, and “some” applauded the offer of the diadem (App. *BCiv.* 2.108/450, 109/457; Plut. *Caes.* 60.3, 61.5–6; Dio 44.10.1; Suet. *Iul.* 79.2); Nic. Dam. in contrast represents these as the unanimous voice of ὁ δῆμος (*FGrH* 90 F130.70, 72–73).

84 Morstein-Marx 2004, 119–159. For the variety of ways in which “public opinion” is meant see Jakob 2007 and in this volume.

85 The phrase: Morstein-Marx 2004, 151. My analysis of the contional crowds *after* Caesar’s assassination (see *ibid.* 150–159) is criticized by Wiseman 2009, 216–234. To my mind he suppresses the tensions and contradictions in our evidence for popular opinion immediately after the killing and omits altogether the evidence for anti-Caesarian popular sentiment beforehand, without which the conspirators’ actions become implausibly clueless.

86 Wiseman 2009, 218–219.

is clear from accounts of the assassination is that the conspirators expected to be met with a significant show of popular support. After the killing, Plutarch describes how the conspirators marched out of Pompey's Theater and up to the Capitol, "not like fugitives, but with glad faces and full of confidence, summoning the multitude to freedom."<sup>87</sup> Appian tells us that the conspirators emerged from the Curia in the Theater of Pompey with their swords still bloody, one of them carrying the "cap of freedom" on the end of a spear, calling upon the People to restore the traditional constitution and to remember Lucius Brutus and the ancient oath he had administered against the kings; they appear to have expected that ὁ δῆμος would immediately flock to them.<sup>88</sup> They "still thought that the Roman People were exactly as they had heard they had been in the time of the Brutus of old, who had brought down the monarchy."<sup>89</sup> Whatever would have given them this idea? Perhaps in particular the graffiti and the other manifestations noted in our sources, together, of course, with all manner of routine communications that are untraceable in our evidence. As it happens, a strong show of public support failed to materialize over the tense few days immediately after the killing, and the demonstration of public grief at Caesar's funeral proved the tipping point. The conspirators suffered a grave failure of "common knowledge", it seems. It is even possible that they misread the "hidden transcript": *Lucius Brutus*, whose spirit the graffitists ostensibly sought to revive, was no conspirator, assassin or Tyrannicide.<sup>90</sup> The graffito itself is never treated in our evidence as a death-threat.

\*

We have examined in detail the three major episodes to which republican political graffiti is central. The question obviously arises whether this was a relatively limited political phenomenon or a much more pervasive one. I would argue that despite the relative scarcity of explicit references to political graffiti and their virtual absence from the extant material evidence, there is reason to believe that this and related practices of "unauthorized" communication were much more common features of the urban landscape than the mere count of citations would suggest. It is notable that Plutarch alone mentions all three of our major republican examples of political graffiti, is our sole source for two of the instances, and our most informative source for the third (Caesar). His greater interest in political graffiti appears to be directly traceable to his biographical purpose, for they are central to

87 Plut. *Caes.* 67.3.

88 App. *BCiv.* 2.119/499, 501.

89 App. *BCiv.* 2.120/504 (strictly speaking, Ῥωμαίων is in the predicative position, which apparently emphasizes the point that the citizenry had fallen away from their ancient state of consummate "Roman-ness"). In Appian, the conspirators and their supporters repeatedly allude to the expulsion of the ancient kings in their attempts to rally popular support (121/509, 122/514): the Brutus-theme of the graffiti is thus continued, but this time it is the populace rather than the praetor who must recover their ancestors' spirit.

90 Rightly emphasized recently by Pina Polo 2006, 80. Note the contrast with Caesar's assassins constructed by Cicero at *Phil.* 2.114.

the motivation of two protagonists (Tiberius Gracchus and Brutus) and illustrate the gravity of the consequences of the downfall of a third (Gaius Gracchus). On the other hand, our other sources – Dio, Appian and Suetonius – take notice only of the anti-Caesarian graffiti, which led in a direct line to the assassination of Julius Caesar and thus tended to constitute an organic part of that crucial narrative. Yet all of these sources (Plutarch included) refer to political graffiti straightforwardly without glossing, in the sort of matter-of-fact way that suggests that it was a perfectly familiar feature of urban political life. So does Cicero, in what I believe is the sole allusion to political graffiti in his copious corpus.<sup>91</sup> It looks as though political graffiti was in fact by no means rare but was most often either disdained by members of the social and political elite as the vulgar “background noise” of urban politics or quietly suppressed as troubling and perhaps largely unimportant revelations of a “hidden transcript” that men like Cicero would rather not hear, or acknowledge hearing. The Gracchan and Caesarian instances were (exceptionally) picked up and reported only for special reasons.

I conclude that political graffiti was a common enough phenomenon in late republican Rome and that it was, as a rule, popular in origin and understood as such. This is not to suggest that it should be naively interpreted as an expression of *the* “General Will” of the people (a dubious concept anyway, as was noted above): with the apparent exception of the exhortations of 133 BC written on “porticoes, walls and tombs”, the cases we have analyzed may have required only a few people to plan and execute. In any individual instance of graffiti, the number of its perpetrators was almost infinitesimally miniscule in proportion to the non-elite residents of the city, much less to all Roman citizens. Yet it may well be that for unauthorized and potentially dangerous messages to be successfully written on a public surface (even at night) and then to survive until broad daylight, and perhaps beyond, required widespread tolerance or sympathy among the general population. To this extent at least, then, we should not go to the opposite extreme of assuming that graffiti represent little more than the random outbursts of a few disgruntled individuals.

On these grounds it is reasonable to view Roman graffiti as *an* (but not “the”) authentic, autonomous voice of the *plebs*. Its purpose and function were typically some combination of generating “common knowledge” and publicly revealing a “hidden transcript” in a protected manner that made it hard for its targets to come to grips with. Our examples show that plebeian “communicative agency” was real

91 Cic. *De orat.* 2.240: *tota Tarracina tum omnibus in parietibus inscriptas fuisse litteras LLLMM*. The passage is problematic (Leeman *et al.* 1989, 245–46), not least because some elements of Crassus’ joke were known to be *ficta*. But, like our other references to political graffiti, complete familiarity with the phenomenon appears to be presumed among Caesar Strabo’s audience and Cicero’s readership. It should be noted that, as the imperial graffiti at the expense of the *Principes* (n. 31) show, mockery of the powerful in graffiti can hardly be considered apolitical. Scott’s discussion of Carnival offers food for thought (Scott 1990, 172–182) as well as George Orwell’s colonial reminiscences quoted by him at pp. 10–11 (cf. 14–15): “My whole life, every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.”



enough and demonstrable both at the level of *critique* of the dominant discourse and at the level of *initiating* messages to political leaders. True, as I have argued elsewhere, the distribution of communicative power in republican mass oratory, a particularly authoritative form of communication, was tilted very heavily toward elite speakers rather than the mass audience. But the examples of “communicative agency” we have examined here help us to see that the common citizens of the city were not simply in thrall to the dominant discourse, led like so many sheep with a chorus of ingratiating but paternalistic rhetoric.<sup>92</sup>

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92 In a similar vein, see Horsfall’s exploration of the “culture of the Roman *plebs*” (Horsfall 1996, 2003).

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