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ZVI YAVETZ

Seianus and the Plebs. A Note

In an illuminating article, first published in 1956,¹ RONALD SYME suggested an ingenious interpretation to an incomplete and rather mutilated inscription. It runs as follows:²

VNC · QVONIAM · N
 at INNORVM · LX · SEIANI · SCE *lerati*
 ITATIO · ET · INPROBAE · COMITIAE *sic*
 AE · FVERVNT · IN · AVENTINO · VBI
 5 *sei* ANVS · COS · FACTVS · EST · ET · EGO
 BILIS · INVUTILIS · BACVLI · COMES *sic*
 VT · SVPPLEX · FIEREM · OMNI · NVNC
 VOS · ROGO · BONI · CONTRI
bul LES · SI · SEMPER · APPARVI
 10 *u* QBIS · BONVS · ET · VTILIS · TRI
bul IS · SI · NVNQVAM · OFFICI *ii mei*
innemor VI · NEC · REL
 I · COI
 R I F

Deviating from his scholarly predecessors (MOMMSEN and DESSAU included),³ SYME suggested that Seianus chose Mons Aventinus (rather than the Campus Martius) in order to parade his own ambitions. He wanted to draw to himself the sympathy of the urban clientele, since Tiberius never made an effort to win the affection of the masses. Hence the Aventine, the old stronghold of Caius Gracchus – signifying the *plebs*, not the *populus Romanus*. SYME never stated explicitly whether Seianus organised the assembly on the Aventine with Tiber-

¹ R.SYME, Seianus on the Aventine, *Hermes* 84, 1956, 257–266; repr. in: *Roman Papers*, ed. E.BADIAN, Oxford 1979, vol. I, 305.

² CIL VI 10213 (ILS 6044; EHRENBERG-JONES 53).

³ SYME's proposal to read in l. 2: *sce[lerata]* or *sce[lesta]* – accepted by D.HENNIG, *L. Aelius Seianus*, Munich 1975, 140, thus attaching it to [*efflag*]itatio rather than to *Seiani*. Since even SYME thought that it was doubtful whether there was room for *efflagitatio* or *flagitatio*, [*inc*]itatio might solve the problem.

ius' connivance or whether this irregular *comitia* made the emperor suspicious of his former friend and associate, a suspicion which led to Seianus' doom. The Roman *plebs*, however, was not going to help Seianus; two famous lines from Juvenal are adduced to prove the fickleness of the mob: *sed quid turba Remi? sequitur fortunam ut semper, et odit damnatos* (Juv. 10.72). SYME never doubted the testimony of Tacitus, who asserted unequivocally that after 14 A.D. the consular elections *e campo comitia ad patres translata sunt*.⁴ He concluded therefore that the inscription indicated only that a part of the electoral ceremonies was staged on the Aventine.

In the most exhaustive, cautious and penetrating study of Seianus, HENNIG is generally in no disagreement with SYME,⁵ but asserts that the importance of the inscription has been overrated.⁶ He does not think that there is enough evidence to assume a Seianus conspiring against Tiberius; he doubts Josephus' story concerning Antonias' letter to the emperor and prefers his own conjecture as if Tiberius must have been incited against Seianus by Macro. He insists (and in my own opinion rightly so) that Seianus had no motif to conspire against Tiberius and tried to avoid as much as possible «durch einen unüberlegten Schritt alles bisher Erreichte zu gefährden».⁷ Considered against a broader background, our inscription can only strengthen his point of view, and this is the purpose of this note.

It is true that Tiberius was never successful in capturing the hearts of the common people and quite consciously refrained from any special effort to gain their love. In this respect he was different from Julius Caesar, Augustus or Germanicus (*alia Tiberium morum via*), and his motto *oderint dum probent*⁸ became the dominant trait of his behaviour throughout his reign. He refused to behave «nicely» to the plebs. This is not to imply that he ignored their material needs, but just to stress that he did what he did only out of duty as a ruler.⁹ He understood that failure in the performance of this duty would bring calamity upon the country¹⁰ and of course upon himself. What Tiberius seems to have

⁴ Tac. Ann. 1.15.1. contra G.TIBILETTI, *Principe e magistrati repubblicani*, Rome 1953, 169.

⁵ HENNIG, op. cit. 141: «Unter den in der Inschrift genannten *comitiae* wird man nur den üblichen Akklamationsvorgang der bereits vom Senat gewählten Magistrate zu verstehen haben.»

⁶ HENNIG, op. cit. 142: «Insgesamt scheint man dieser Inschrift mehr Bedeutung beigemessen zu haben, als sie in Wirklichkeit verdient.»

⁷ Op. cit. 150; cf. Jos. Ant. 18.181 ff.

⁸ Suet. Tib. 59.

⁹ For references concerning Tiberius' efforts to satisfy the needs of the *plebs* — see my *Plebs and Princeps*, New Brunswick 1988², 103 ff.

¹⁰ Tac. Ann. 3.54.8 cf. 4.6.6. (on corn supply); on dealing with the plight of the citizens living next to the banks of the river after great floods, see Tac. Ann. 1.76; 4.64; 4.45; Dio 57.7 etc.

misunderstood is the precept, later formulated by Seneca: *Idem est quod datur, sed interest quo modo detur*,¹¹ and indeed it is the *quomodo* rather than the *quod* that harmed Tiberius' image among the Roman crowds. Three little stories may illustrate my point:

There was in Rome at the time a statue by Lysippus known as the Apoxyomenos which portrayed a man scratching himself. Agrippa had placed the statue in front of the public baths and it became extremely popular among the common people. It transpired that Tiberius also liked the statue and had it removed to his private chamber. The enraged populace gave vent to their anger during a theatrical performance, shouting: «Tiberius, give us back the Apoxyomenos.»¹² Tiberius gave in, and returned the statue, but the common people did not see this as a sign of his having taken account of their needs; instead it was viewed as a sign of weakness and panic and giving in to popular demand unwillingly like one possessed of the devil.

On another occasion, in the middle of a funeral, a clown cried out to the dead man asking him to take a message to the late Augustus, telling him that Tiberius had not paid the people the sums bequeathed to them in Augustus' will. Tiberius had the man immediately arrested, paid him his share and then had him executed so that he could go and tell Augustus that all was well and that the account had been settled satisfactorily.¹³ Needless to say that this kind of «humour» did not enhance Tiberius' popularity.

The third story is much more serious. When Tiberius decided to retreat to the island of Capri the people saw his behaviour as an act of contempt towards them, very much in the same vein as the view taken by the Parisian masses many years later of their king's departure for Versailles. Not surprisingly, at the time, a story circulated in Rome that Tiberius had a giant snake that he used to feed and play with, until one day he found it eaten by a hoard of ants. The emperor took this as a warning and an augury «that he must beware of the power of the masses».¹⁴ This was the popular explanation for his refusal to return from Capri to Rome until the end of his days. It seems to me that these kinds of tales that circulated in the city about his insults and injuries to public taste were by far more damaging to his public image among the plebs than his decision to transfer the elections for the consulate from the *comitia* to the senate.

Most scholars discount anecdotal material. I, on the other hand, suggest that one should not belittle it. Sometimes a simple story can shed light on complex and difficult theoretical questions. Anecdotes in the Talmud are compared to a

¹¹ Sen. Ben. 2.6.1.

¹² PP. HN 34.62.

¹³ Suet. Tib. 57.2; Dio 57.14 (1–2).

¹⁴ Suet. Tib. 72.2, cf. Tib. 37.2.

very precious pearl lost by a king in a dark room, but recovered with the help of an inexpensive candle. I would like to argue that every ruler gets the anecdotes he deserves, and that Tiberius was no exception.

Seianus knew of course Tiberius' standing with the masses of Rome, but he also knew that he owed to Tiberius everything he had. He was loyal to him and never contradicted or acted against his requests. Having been elected consul along with Tiberius at the beginning of 31 A.D., he knew that without Tiberius' recommendation no such appointment was possible; having been bestowed with the *imperium proconsulare* soon afterwards,¹⁵ he came close to parity with Tiberius.¹⁶ Missing only the *tribunicia potestas*, he must have considered his relationship to Tiberius as similar to that of Agrippa vis-à-vis Augustus. And the *tribunicia potestas* was imminent, irrelevant whether Tiberius had explicitly promised it to Seianus or whether the latter believed that the promise had been made. Hence the assembly on the Aventine. Once Tiberius supported Seianus' «election» as consul, the assembly had a purely ceremonial significance. Seianus did not have to ask Tiberius for permission to convene it. He could have hoped that an assembly on the Aventine, convened by him, would be considered by the *plebs* as having received Tiberius' blessing; it would have enhanced the emperor's popularity among the masses, and at the same time bolster his own image among those who still kept the *tribunicia potestas* in high regard. In any case: Seianus thought that even if it would not help, it could not hurt him. Anyway, he never considered it as an act of sedition.

When Tiberius decided to waste him, and nobody knows what turned him on against his close friend and partner,¹⁷ he had no doubt that the urban *plebs* was never attached to Seianus, the notorious enemy of the Germanicus-clan. The *comitia* on the Aventine must have been totally unsuccessful, and the emperor could easily blame Seianus – rightly or wrongly – for having organised the *inprobæ comitiæ* on the Aventine and asserting that he himself was never found lacking in the fulfillment of his obligations towards the common people. This was, indeed, the purpose of the inscription. The *plebs*, however, did not believe him either. The Roman masses were not as fickle as depicted in literature. They adored Germanicus and his family, and remained faithful to him even after his death. When the rumour of his mysterious demise reached Rome, their distress was deep and sincere, or in Tacitus' words: *populus plus sibi in principem occultæ vocis aut suspicacis silentii permisit*.¹⁸ They never forgave Seianus

¹⁵ HENNIG, op. cit. 142.

¹⁶ SYME, op. cit. 265 (Roman Papers 314^o).

¹⁷ HENNIG, op. cit. 149–150: rejects Jos. Ant. 18.181 as if Antonia had warned Tiberius from a conspiracy led by Seianus. However, for the conjecture put forward by him that Macro was behind Tiberius' decision, there is no conclusive evidence either.

¹⁸ Tac. Ann. 3.11.2.

for having been instrumental in the systematic mistreatment of Germanicus' widow and his sons, and therefore rejoiced after his execution. And they utterly disliked Tiberius as well for the reasons described above.

By some «sixth sense» they managed to find out, who among their leaders really had an authentic soft spot for them in his heart. This «soft spot» was just as important to them as the ability of the ruler to look out for their economic interests; and once they detected it as being in place, they remained constant in their devotion to their «loved ones», not only to the end of their days, but even after their death, when it was quite clear that no issue of personal benefit could be connected to this devotion. Their behaviour towards Saturninus, 37 years after his death, and to Julius Caesar after his assassination is typical in this matter.¹⁹ It is therefore not necessary to blame the fickle rabble by adducing brilliant lines of some great poets²⁰ since no lesser than Goethe believed that masses treated decently could behave differently:

«Sage, tun wir nicht recht? Wir müssen den Pöbel betrügen.
Sieh nur, wie ungeschickt, sieh nur, wie wild er sich zeigt!
Ungeschickt und wild sind alle rohen Betrognen;
Seid nur redlich, und so führt ihn zum Menschlichen an!»²¹

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¹⁹ See Plebs and Princeps (n. 9) – passim, esp. 58 ff.

²⁰ See above – Juv. 10.69; cf. BEN JONSON, *Seianus. His Fall* (16.3), ed. by PH. J. AYRES, Manchester 1990, 3, 407–460; cf. Act V, pp. 784 ff.:

They follow fortune, and hate men condemned guilty, or not.
But had Seianus thrived
In his design, and prosperously oppressed,
The old Tiberius, then, in the same minute
These very rascals, that now rape like furies
Would have proclaimed Seianus Emperor.

²¹ J. W. V. GOETHE, *Epigramme*, Venice 1790.

