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The Life of a Rumor: Livy Book 22.12-39

Livy has the dictator Q. Fabius Maximus warn the consul-designate for 216, L. Aemilius Paulus, to beware his demagogic colleague C. Terentius Varro (22.39.1-22). Fabius specifically exhorts Aemilius to endure the slander found in rumors (*Resistes autem adversus famam rumoresque hominum* 22.39.18), those reports that should be of uncertain origin and uncertain truthfulness. A close analysis of the life of these rumors as portrayed in the preceding narrative, however, suggests little if any uncertainty in origin or truthfulness. By tracing the birth, growth, and death of a rumor in Livy's Book 22.14-39, this paper will demonstrate that Livy critiques rumor as an illegitimate mode of discourse rather than as an inaccurate source of information. Rumor, as will be seen, hijacks legitimate modes of political discourse such as *contiones* and dispatches from the front and subverts them to disseminate faulty ideas marred by flawed judgment.

What the dictator Fabius calls *famam rumoresque* came to life in the grumblings of his *magister equitum* M. Minucius Rufus. As soon as Fabius took command of the troops and unveiled his strategy of *cunctatio*, Minucius complained of his timidity to a few men, then to a crowd (22.12.1-12). Finally, his griping burst into an extended diatribe in *oratio recta* (22.14.4-15). Here lies the origin of the rumors, though they are not yet labeled as such, and they do little more at a factual level than claim that Fabius refuses to engage Hannibal. Nonetheless, the rumors soon have dire consequences, first on the battlefield, then at home. L. Hostilius Mancinus, who had heard and believed the tirade of Minucius, ignored the orders of Fabius and led his cavalry unit to its death in a foolhardy charge (22.15.4-10). Later, at Rome, the tribune M. Metilius took up the substance of Minucius' remarks and made the unprecedented demand that the *magister equitum* receive power equal to that of the dictator (22.25.2-11).

This bold move marks a second stage in the rumor's growth. With Fabius absent in Rome, Minucius contravened his superior's command and attacked Hannibal (22.24.1-14). The narrow victory became a resounding success in the letters Minucius sent back to Rome. Once again, Livy pinpoints the source of the rumor and makes explicit that the rumor errs in judgment rather than in fact.

The narrative has consistently encouraged the reader to admire the judgment and the strategy of Fabius and, conversely, to disapprove of Minucius and his temerity. Livy depicts Fabius as a victim, stoic in the face of ignorant assaults on his character (22.15.1; 22.25.12). And, just as he advised Aemilius, Fabius persevered. The long-suffering Fabius was able to see the rumors die after he rescued Minucius, who foolishly exercised his newly increased *imperium*, from a trap set by Hannibal (22.28.1-29.6). Minucius realized his error and returned his legions to the dictator (22.30.3-5). Thus was the political order restored and the havoc wrought by rumor brought to an end.