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**(Re)inventing the Sabine: Cato the Elder and Sabine Identity in Republican Rome**

Writers of the classical world agreed that the Sabines, central Italian neighbors of the Latins, uniformly possessed a peculiar personality and character. The stereotype was very positive, considering the Sabines to be tough, disciplined, and rustic—throw-backs to a simpler, more virtuous time. One can see this image in words that writers regularly use to describe the character of the Sabines: *severus*, *ridigus*, *durus*, *tristis* and *acer* (e.g. Cato the Elder, Cicero, Vergil, Horace). The stereotype also included that the Sabines had large families and a frugal lifestyle (Cato, Varro, Vergil), as well as exceptional piety (Cato, Cn. Gellius, Cicero, Verrius Flaccus).

Some found a genealogical explanation for these admirable qualities by attributing Sabine character to their descent from the famously virtuous Spartans. In the second century BC, Cato, Cn. Gellius and Sempronius Tuditanus, claimed that a Spartan named Sabus was the eponymous founder of the Sabines. By the late Republic, most Romans had accepted both the positive Sabine image as well as their Spartan genealogy. Accordingly, several aristocratic families of Sabine origin, like the Claudii, Valerii and Aurelii, even placed Spartan heroes in their family trees.

According to earlier writers, however, the Sabines used to be very different. Specifically, both Fabius Pictor and Cincius Alimentus allude to Sabine luxury in their accounts of the Tarpeia myth. Tarpeia was a Roman matron who, during the war between Romulus and Titus Tatius, betrayed the Roman citadel to the Sabines out of her desire to obtain Sabine gold. Both authors explain that at the time the Sabines "wore ornaments of gold and were no less luxurious than the Etruscans." Pictor added that the Romans only realized true wealth once they had conquered the Sabines in the third century BC. Both writers imply that the Sabines of their own day were not wealthy, but that this was by circumstance and not by choice. Moreover, in the *Annales* of the early second century poet Ennius, Titus Tatius seems to have been portrayed as a tyrant—once again, a characterization more in line with an Etruscan king than a Sabine one.

These wealthy, Etruscan-like Sabines are completely inconsistent with the Sabines of later sources. In fact, both the familiar "austere" Sabines and their Spartan origin appear for the first time in our extant fragments of Cato, who wrote about a generation after Pictor and the others. I argue that Cato not only promoted the idea of virtuous Sabines, but that he actually created this image and their Spartan origin. I suggest that he did this to advance the Sabines socially and politically, since he was probably Sabine himself, and to urge the Romans of his own day to emulate the Sabines as he conceived of them. His historical work, the *Origines*, was in part devoted to the origins of various Italian peoples, and so was probably the primary medium of his pro-Sabine propaganda. Cato's authority as the first Latin historian established this image of the austere Sabine, and anecdotes and stories from later writers show they agreed with Cato. Cato's own personality gave authority to this stereotype—as did that of other Sabine Romans—and so his image of the Sabine became canonical.