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The Importance of Being Sabine: the Falsification of Italic Ethnicity in the Political Culture of the Late Roman Republic

This paper argues that the competition for political office in the late Roman Republic drove many prospective politicians to falsify their origins. In particular, many ambitious men claimed to have a Sabine origin so that they could benefit from that group's reputation for prisca virtus. The celebration of the Sabines, and the proliferation of the cognomen Sabinus attests to the popularity of Sabine ethnicity; and sources from the time note the falsification of a Sabine origo by politicians in their day. Finally, there is evidence that many central Apennine groups also claimed kinship with the Sabines as a way to facilitate their entrance into Roman politics.

Sabine origin had been popular ever since Cato the Elder. Their familiar stereotype appears first in the fragments of his Origines, as does the Spartan genealogy that rationalizes their character. This reputation was aided by traditions that linked the early history of Rome with the Sabines, as well as by claims to Sabine descent by some ancient noble families of Rome. The image of the Sabines was continued by major writers of the later Republic, in particular Piso Frugi and Varro. By the early empire, there was an applied interest in things Sabine: a "reinstitution" of the cult of Titus Tatius; a restoration of Sabine monuments; and even a movement to declaim in Latin in a "Sabine" manner.

Among the office-holding classes of Rome, we see a corresponding rise in the advertisement of Sabine ethnicity. Many "Sabine" Romans advertise famous Sabines (e.g. Numa and Ancus Marcius) or scenes from Sabine history on coins they mint as moneymen, and on the monuments they build for the public. There is much evidence to suggest that ambitious Italian noblemen also tried to buy into the popularity of Sabine ethnicity to legitimize their rise to prominence or, in fact, to effect it. Many seem to have adopted the cognomen Sabinus to do this: over 1700 examples of "Sabinus" (and derivatives) are known, making it the most popular ethnic cognomen. Furthermore, Wiseman has proven that several senators who bear the cognomen were demonstrably not from Sabine territory.

Moreover, Cicero, in an extraordinary letter, mentions a man he knows who has adopted the cognomen Sabinus in order to get elected to high office. In addition, we find a contemporary poem that notes the rise of a Cisalpine muleteer to curule office, and the secret to this man's success seems to have been adoption of the popular name "Sabinus". I emphasize that these sources are further proof of the popularity of Sabinity in Republican political culture.

Finally, I turn to the phenomenon of other Italic people claiming descent from the Sabines to legitimize themselves to the Roman political establishment. Dench has shown that men of central Apennine origin played upon the confusion that existed over the differences between the Sabines and other linguistically similar groups. It seems that they may have rationalized that they were virtual Sabines, most notably by using (and perhaps inventing) the usefully unclear ethnic moniker "Sabellus."

In sum, this paper will serve as a brief examination of the little studied phenomenon of Italic ethnic stereotyping applied to the political culture of the late Republic. It shows that aristocratic families constructed Sabine identity to advertise themselves to the Roman people and so (they hoped) to win elections at Rome. Some, however, took this one step farther and falsified their connection to the Sabines because they thought they would gain some political advantage.