

“Reading the Body Politic: the Character of the *Plebs* in Livy I”

1. *Livy Praef. §6*:

Quae ante conditam condendamve urbem
 poeticis magis decora fabulis quam incorruptis
 rerum gestarum monumentis traduntur.

The events before the foundation of city, or
 when it was about to be founded are handed
 down as more appropriate to the tales of
 poets, than to the incorruptible monuments of
 history.

2. *Livy’s ‘popular’ vocabulary*:

WORD ¹	FREQ. ²	MEANINGS	EXAMPLES
MULTITUDO	29	“population” “mob”	1.3.3: <i>abundante Lavinii multitudine</i> (when the population at Lavinium was overflowing) 1.59.6: <i>quacumque incedit armata multitudo, pavorem ac tumultum facit</i> (wherever the mob advanced, it caused panic and chaos)
PLEBS	25	“non-patres” “crowd” (non-military) “common folk;” “rabble”	1.26.5: <i>atrox visum id facinus patribus plebesque...</i> (this deed seemed savage to both the fathers and the people...) 1.16.8: <i>mirum ... [quam] desiderium Romuli apud plebem exercitumque facta fide immortalitatis lenitum sit.</i> (it is remarkable ... how the longing for Romulus among the people and the army was alleviated once a pledge of his immortality had been made) 1.35.2: <i>isque primus ... orationem dicitur habuisse ad conciliandos plebis animos compositam.</i> (and this man is said to be the first to have structured a speech for the purpose of winning over the minds of the commons)
POPULUS	103 ³	“sovereign nation” “mass-gathering” “official legislative/electoral/judicial body”	1.28.7: <i>ut ex uno quondam in duos populos divisa Albana res est, sic nunc in unum redeat</i> (as the Alban state was formerly divided from one nation into two, so let it now return into one) 1.41.1: <i>clamor inde concursusque populi, mirantium quid rei esset</i> (a shout then arose, and a rushing together of the crowd, wondering what the matter was...) 1.46.1: <i>ausus est ferre ad populum vellent iuberentne se regnare</i> (he dared to bring the matter before the people, whether they wished and ordered him to be king)

¹ Livy also infrequently uses “vulgus” (1.26.5, 1.27.1, 2.7.5, 2.8.3) or “turba” (1.8.6, 1.12.3) to describe the urban population. Because of the rarity of these occurrences, I have chosen not to treat them in detail here.

² These numbers represent the number of occurrences of the word from the *praefatio* to the end of II.9, where the narrative shifts from the political to the military situation after the expulsion of the kings.

³ This number includes the common phrase “populus Romanus” (or “populus Albanus”) used in, e.g., the narrative of the fetial formula (chapter 24) no less than 10 times.

3. Livy 1.7.1:

Priori Remo augurium venisse fertur, sex vultures; iamque nuntiatio augurio cum duplex numerus Romulo se ostendisset, utrumque regem sua multitudo consulaverat.

It is said that the augury had come to Remus first: six vultures. And after that sign had already been announced, when twice that number appeared to Romulus, each man's throng had hailed each man as king...

4. Livy 1.8.1:

Rebus divinis rite perpetratis vocataque ad concilium multitudine quae coalescere in populi unius corpus nulla re praeterquam legibus poterat, iura dedit.

When the divine rituals had been correctly completed and the population had been summoned to an assembly, which [sc. population] was unable to grow together into a body of one people by no other means except by means of laws, he established the rule of law.

5. Livy 1.17.7-11:

Fremere deinde plebs multiplicatam servitatem, centum pro uno dominos factos; nec ultra nisi regem et ab ipsis creatum videbantur passuri. Cum sensissent ea moveri patres, offerendum ultro rati quod amissuri erant, ita gratiam ineunt summa potestate populo permissa ut non plus darent iuris quam detinerent. Decreverunt enim ut cum populus regem iussisset, id sic ratum esset si patres auctores fiunt...Adeo id gratum plebi fuit ut, ne victi beneficio viderentur, id modo sciscerent iuberentque ut senatus decerneret qui Romae regnaret.

The commons then began to grumble at their multiplied state of servitude, saying that a hundred masters had been created in the place of one. Nor did they seem about to suffer anything, except that the king be chosen by them. When the senators perceived that these ideas were afoot, they decided that what they were about to lose ought to be offered voluntarily; they obtained favor in such a way that, with the supreme power having been entrusted to the People, they [the senators] did not give away more of their rights than they retained. For they decreed that when the People had made known their choice for king, it would be ratified only if the senators should give their authorization. This [decision] was so welcome to the plebs that, in order that they not appear to have been conquered by benevolence, decided and ordered merely that the senate should decide who should rule at Rome.

6. Livy 1.35.2:

Isque primus et petisse ambiciose regnum et orationem dicitur habuisse conciliandos plebis animos compositam.

This man is said to be the first, both to have sought the kingship through *ambitio*, and to have given a speech designed to win over the minds of the plebs.

7. Livy 1.56.1-2:

Non pecunia solum ad id publica est usus sed operis etiam ex plebe. Qui cum haud parvus et ipse militiae adderetur labor, minus tamen plebs gravabatur se templa deum exaedificare manibus suis quam postquam et ad alia, ut specie minora, sic laboris aliquanto maioris traducebantur opera, foros in circo faciendos cloacamque maximam, receptaculum omnium purgamentorum urbis, sub terra agendam.

He used not only public funds for this purpose, but also the services of the plebs. Although this labor was by no means small, and was in addition to their military service, still the plebs were less aggrieved that they were building temples of the gods with their own hands than that afterwards they were handed over to other projects—as much lesser in splendor as greater in toil—namely for making benches in the circus, and for building below ground the Cloaca Maxima, the receptacle for all the city's waste.

8. Livy 1.56.3:

His laboribus exercita plebe, quia et urbi multitudinem, ubi usus non esset, oneri rebatur esse et colonis mittendis occupari latius imperii fines volebat, Signiam Circeiosque colonos misit, praesidia urbi futura terra marique.

When the plebs was engaged in these projects, because he thought that the common folk were a burden to the city when not kept busy, and because he wanted the borders of the empire to be more widely occupied by establishing colonies, he did so at Signia and Circeii, as protection for the city by land and sea .

9. Pliny Nat. Hist. 36.107:

Cum id opus Tarquinius Priscus plebis manibus faceret, essetque labor incertum maior an longior, passim conscita nece Quiritibus taedium fugientibus, novum, inexcogitatum ante posteaque remedium invenit ille rex, ut omnium ita defunctorum corpora figeret cruci spectanda civibus simul et feris volucrisque laceranda.

When Tarquinius Priscus was carrying out this project via the hands of the plebs, and it was doubtful whether the toil would be greater or of longer duration, and the people were seeking escape from their exhaustion by committing suicide, that king devised a remedy that had been thought of neither before or in later times. He crucified the bodies of all the dead, as a spectacle for the citizens and at the same time as prey for wild animals and birds.

10. Livy 1.59.9:

Addita superbia ipsius regis miseriaeque et labores plebis in fossas cloacasque exhauriendas demersae; Romanos homines, victores omnium circa populorum, opifices ac lapidas pro bellatoribus factos.

The arrogance of this same king was mentioned in addition, and the sufferings and toils of the plebs, sunk in the ditches and clearing out of sewers; [he said that] Roman men, conquerors of all the surrounding peoples, had become manual laborers and stone-cutters, instead of warriors.

11. Livy 2.1.1-6:

Liberi iam hinc populi Romani res...gestas peragam. ...neque ambigitur quin Brutus idem qui tantum gloriae superbo exacto rege meruit pessimo publico id facturus fuerit, si libertatis immaturae cupidine priorum regum alicui regnum extorsisset. Quid enim futurum fuit, si illa pastorum convenarumque plebs, transfuga ex suis populis, sub tutela inviolati templi aut libertatem aut certe impunitatem adeptam, soluta regio metu agitari coepta esset tribuniciis procellis, et in aliena urbe cum patribus serere certamina, priusquam pignera coniugum ac liberorum caritasque ipsius soli, cui longo tempore adsuescitur, animos eorum consociasset? Dissipatae res nondum adultae discordia forent, quas fovit tranquilla moderatio imperii eoque nutriendo perduxit ut bonam frugem libertatis maturis iam viribus ferre posset.

From this point I will go through the affairs...of the now free Roman People, ... Nor is there any question but that this same Brutus, who earned so much glory when the arrogant king had been removed, would have done this for the worst public goal, if out of desire for premature liberty he had wrested the power of ruling from some one of the previous kings. For what would have happened, if that mob of shepherds and foreigners, vagabonds from their own lands, had taken up liberty...(or impunity at any rate), under the guardianship of inviolable sanctuary, when with the fear of kings removed they began to be roused by tribunician quarrels, and to sow disputes with the senators in a city which was not their own, before the ties of wives and children, and affection for the very soil itself, to which one becomes accustomed over a long period, had united together their intentions? The state, which peaceful restraint of power supports, would have been destroyed by discord, while still in its infancy, [instead of] being brought to a point by careful nurturing where it was able to bear the noble fruit of liberty with strength already mature.

12. Aristotle *Politics* 1252b28-32:

Ἡ δ' ἐκ πλείωνων κοινῶν κοινωνία τέλειος πόλις, ἣδη πάσης ἔχουσα πέρας τῆς αὐταρκειᾶς ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, γινομένη μὲν οὖν τοῦ ζῆν ἕνεκεν, οὐσα δὲ τοῦ εὖ ζῆν. διὸ πάσα πόλις φύσει ἐστίν, εἴπερ καὶ αἱ πρῶται κοινωνίαι.

The partnership finally arising from several villages is the polis; it has at last attained the limit of virtually complete self-sufficiency, and thus, while it comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life. For this reason, every polis exists by nature, inasmuch as the first partnerships also exist by nature.

13. Dion. Hal. 2.16.2:

ταῦτά τε δὴ καὶ τᾶλλα τούτοις ὅμοια
καταστησάμενος πολιτεύματα μεγάλην ἐκ
μικρᾶς ἐποίησε τὴν ἀποικίαν, ὡς αὐτὰ τὰ
ἔργα ἐδήλωσεν.

Having established these policies and others
similar to these he [sc. Romulus] made the
colony great from small beginnings, as the
results showed.

14. Cicero de Rep. 2.23 (Scipio):

Ergo...cum ille Romuli senatus ... temptaret
post Romuli excessum, ut ipse regeret sine rege
rem publicam, populus id non tulit
desiderioque Romuli postea regem flagitare
non destitit; cum prudenter illi principes
novam et inauditam ceteris gentibus interregni
ineundi rationem excogitaverunt...

Thus, after Romulus' death, when that senate
of Romulus was aiming to rule the state by
itself, without a king, the people did not allow
it, and out of longing for Romulus, did not
afterwards cease to demand a king. Then those
leading men astutely devised a new and to
other nations unheard of policy—that of
entering an interregnum.

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