Excellence Redefined: The Evolution of *Virtus* in Ancient Rome

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by

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Abstract

While there has been extensive academic research for over a thousand years in the field of Classics, it is impressive to note just how much research still needs to be done. For my thesis, I plan to take some of my own personal academic interest and channel it into a largely understudied topic: the evolution of the Roman value of virtus, and the effects that this change produced in Roman society. Virtus, which was in many ways held to be the paramount quality an ancient Roman male could possess, was initially expressed through an assertion of martial prowess. No simple translation for this ideal exists, however; “bravery” or “manliness”, while sometimes used, do not fully render the complex importance of virtus. Historian Myles McDonnell sums the notion up best: “the relationship... between virtus and all the other things the Romans valued – liberty, property, family, and fatherland – is one of dependence. Virtus embraces all that is good because it is virtus that guards and preserves all that is good” (McDonnell, 32).

Over the course of time, however, history sees virtus make a gradual shift as an ideal manifested through military distinction to a more liberal celebration of “excellence”, not dissimilar from the Greek notion of ἀρετή. While most classicists and historians alike seem to agree that the ideal did indeed evolve over time, the study of what caused this shift has only barely been explored. Dr. Steven Tuck, faculty advisor for my project, has in fact been one among few in the field to posit this question, and thus he has been and will continue to be a valuable resource to my research. My own personal goals are to
examine how popular figures helped transmit new spins on the definition of *virtus*, with what means, for what purposes, and what the repercussions were. I will look at such war-heroes as Fabius Maximus, Scipio Africanus, Titus Flamininus, Marius and Pompey, and how they helped begin the process by melding their battlefield prowess with the Greek notion of greatness. Furthermore, under the establishment of the principate, emperors such as Augustus, Gaius, Claudius, Nero, and Domitian would use their position to endorse a less militaristic definition of *virtus*, and consequently strengthen their own position, making it independent of some military achievement.

To pursue the study of my thesis, I intend to research a wide array of primary sources, collecting as much information as possible from different texts that deal with key figures from the Republic through early Empire, and seeing how *virtus* comes into play. In addition, I will also reference secondary sources from works of other scholars, reflecting carefully on what work has been done on the reception of *virtus* and the individuals I plan on studying. Dr. Tuck, with whom I had previously completed an independent study on *virtus* and the Roman arena, has proven himself to me to be an excellent guide in my search for resources. Not only does he direct me to pertinent primary and secondary sources alike, but he also engages me in academic discussion, motivating me to derive my own ideas from the texts, thereby playing an active role as a scholar.

After a lengthy period of research in this manner, I will begin on drafting and revising my thesis in steps. Since the thesis I have covers a broad scope of material, I will need to make sure to take the time of organizing chapters to constitute my final argument. This process will take place mostly throughout the second semester. Beyond having Dr.
Tuck as my advisor and reader for my thesis, I shall also seek the advice of Dr. Judith de Luce, whose interest in Roman studies, and particularly the Punic Wars, should be a great asset to my work.

From the time I have begun my study in Classics here at Miami, I have found historical research to be my favorite aspect of the field. Delving into the lives and culture of people who lived over 2,000 years ago has always fascinated me and reinforced to me why the lives and culture of people today are equally as important. To have this chance to pursue detailed independent research on some of my favorite historical figures in a bold new light is incredibly exciting. I feel that the scholarship required of me in this task will build new strength in me as a learner, and furthermore be a wonderful preparation to me as I prepare for studies at a graduate level.

My thesis is significant to the field of Classics in as that the evolution of *virtus*, while acknowledged as existing, has not been deeply explored. How the process is manifested in people and events, and what drove its manifestation in the first place, is still an area of much discussion. My work on this thesis is therefore somewhat original in nature, especially concerning the alteration of *virtus* during the middle-Republic. This new perspective, I believe, is one which may help redefine how my fellow academics consider the actions and importance of Roman society and its public figures.
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CHAPTER ONE

Virtus: The Greatest Wealth of Rome

In 222 BCE, the Roman general Marcus Claudius Marcellus won for himself the distinctive honor of the *spolia opima*; in the battle of Clastidium, he had not only led the Roman army to victory, but he had also personally triumphed against the Gallic chieftain Britomartus. The Roman Senate awarded Marcellus with a triumph, within which the victorious general dedicated the spoils of his conquered foe to the Temple of Jupiter Feretrius. (Plutarch, *Marcellus* 8) It was also in this year that Marcellus vowed that he would build a temple to *Honos et Virtus*, a vow which he would fulfill by extending the current temple of *Honos* to adjoin a new shrine of *Virtus*. (Richardson, 190). Marcellus would be remembered in Rome’s history as the last of her men to ever win the *spolia opima*, but he was certainly not the first, nor the last, to make a connection between his *honos* and *virtus*. For the Roman, *virtus* was a prerequisite of *honos*, and, ideally, it was *honos* that helped inspire *virtus*.

When Marcellus had stripped the enemy leader and thereby won the *spolia opima*, he had won for himself the highest degree of honor in the Roman Republic, one that was considered an ultimate symbol of *virtus*, and one which secured him political importance in Rome (Rosenstein, 131). This reception of *virtus* had celebrated the same spirit of Rome when Romulus consecrated his own spoils to Jupiter and dedicated his city’s first temple on the occasion (Livy, 1.11). Other figures of Roman history, from legendary
heroes such as Horatius Cocles to the stern reforming general Marius, from the cautious Fabius Maximus to the audacious Julius Caesar, from the stoic Cato the Elder to the flamboyant emperor Nero would all be seeking to make a claim to their *virtus*. The goal for all men was the same; their methods, however, were quite different.

To label a single period, event, or mechanism as the catalyst for the evolution of *virtus* would be a gross oversimplification. The transitions that this value underwent across the centuries were many and arose from a variety of factors. In this review of the process, I wish to specifically focus on key turning points that I consider to be notable, some more subtle and others obvious. While we can see a very clear redefinition of *virtus* take place under the principate, for example, we may not so readily be aware of how transformational the middle-republic was to its definition. While the middle Republic did not bring forth a golden age of Latin writing and literature as occurred in the late Republic/early Empire, it was nonetheless a key period to formation of ideas and notions that would set precedents for cultural developments of later Rome, and thus I will examine it at length among other seminal stages.

In early Rome, the dominating notion of *virtus* was a raw, physical, and very militaristic one, very separate from lofty, artistic aspirations or influences of *αρετή*. Indeed, this early *virtus*, although demonstrated by an individual, was something that manifestly connected with the state itself (McDonnell, 90). *Virtus* was more than the achievement of one man, but of the Roman spirit through strength of arms. While the heroes of the Greeks celebrated their *αρετή* not only on the battlefield, but also through public sport and game (Homer, 23.374), it is notable that even in the time of Augustus, when *virtus* had been greatly affected by Greek influence, that Rome’s national epic, the *Aeneid*, explicitly connects manhood to arms from the very beginning. (Vergil, 1.1) The
evolution of this value, therefore, is about more than just a changing ideal; since virtus was a defining national characteristic of Rome’s men, its transformation reflects a shift in Roman identity itself.

Across all periods of ancient Rome’s history, enormous pressure weighed on the Roman male to achieve virtus along with such other values as gloria, dignitas, and nobilitas (Rosenstein, 1). All these values were intrinsically connected through virtus, since it was the safeguard of the Roman way of life. Myles McDonnell comments: “the relationship... between virtus and all the other things the Romans valued – liberty, property, family, and fatherland – is one of dependence. Virtus embraces all that is good because it is virtus that guards and preserves all that is good” (McDonnell, 32).

This “ad maiorem Romae gloriam” notion of virtus is further demonstrated in the important role it held in politics. A man’s ability to show he possessed virtus helped secure him the public’s approval: “a reputation for martial prowess and military competence was the best way to be elected to high office, because the citizens who elected a Roman magistrate were the same men who fought under him in Rome’s legions” (McDonnell, 185). A Roman’s courage and prowess on the battlefield was therefore clearly more than an object of self-glorification, but was rooted in the need of the country to defend and expand itself without military fiasco. The aristocratic individual could ascend to positions of great renown and influence in the Roman world if he was able to display virtus, not because it was not a singular excellence, but because it was a pledge of his ability to defend the nation.

To be a vir in the Roman world, then, required one to acknowledge the call to virtus – in becoming a man, the Roman took on not only the singular responsibility of adulthood, but also the toga virilis, a symbol that his strength and victories were united to
the greatness of the nation itself. It might here be noted that Roman women, although they might exhibit nobility of character, rarely were described in terms of *virtus*. Cloelia, the young girl who led Roman hostages across the Tiber, is remarkable in her display of “*novam in femina virtutem*” (Livy, 2.13). For most women, however, bravery was to be exhibited in strength of spirit, and not physically manifested. *Virtus*, as a value that was conveyed through some form of physical feat, traditionally on the battlefield, was therefore generally applied to the Roman man only. Even in later periods, when *virtus* carried ethical connotations, it seems to rarely be applied to women. Another notable exception is Porcia, the wife of Brutus and daughter of Cato the Younger. Brutus remarked that despite her lack of physicality, Porcia’s courage was equal to that of the men who surrounded her: “She may not have the strength for the exploits that are expected of a man, but she has the spirit to fight as nobly for her country as any of us.” (Plutarch, *Life of Brutus*, 23) Nevertheless, this comment, rather than defying the boundaries of *virtus* as a masculine value, actually reinforces this notion. While Portia is an exemption to the rule for women, Brutus clearly states that such courage is “expected of a man.” Thus *virtus*, whether martial or ethical, generally belonged strictly to the *vir*.

To understand the gradual shift which occurred throughout the centuries however, it is necessary to first consider the original concept of *virtus*. To begin, we might look to some of Rome’s greatest early heroes for examples. Men such as Romulus, the Horatii, Horatius Cocles, Mucius Scaevola, and Marcus Curtius were all larger-than-life figures. Yet they were more than legendary role-models. These early historic figures also demonstrate early actions of *virtus* and give us insight to the origin of this complex ideal. One should be aware that the surviving writings we have of these men were written hundreds of years afterwards; Livy, Pliny the Elder, Dionysus of Halicarnassus, Plutarch,
Polybius, Plautus, and Tacitus were among some of those to extol the courage of individuals in Rome’s early history. Livy, whose history, *Ab Urbe Condita*, gives an extensive account of early Rome that is steeped in legend. It must be noted, however, that he lived and wrote during the end of the Civil Wars into the time of Augustus. His temporal and political biases, however, do not change the fact that these ancient men were legendary for their martial glory in the service of Rome. Whether or not Livy may have placed moral embellishments in his stories, we are nevertheless given the reputed deeds that these men accomplished, and it is these actions, not Livy’s interpretations of them, that are of interest to this study. The legend of Marcus Curtius may indeed be fantastic in nature, and serve Livy’s purpose of demonstrating an age where Romans were nobler in spirit and put their own interests behind those of the Republic. Yet the *virtus* of this young man arrayed for battle driving his horse into a chasm for his country is certainly a far cry from the *virtus* that the emperor Commodus would try to claim while emulating Hercules, killing exotic animals before the senators, and then taunting them with the head of an ostrich to cheer him on. (Dio, 73.19-21)

One of the earliest figures to ever connect *virtus* with a sense of Roman identity was Romulus himself. The man himself probably never existed; his name, an eponym of the city itself, was likely no more real than the legendary dating of Rome’s origins, 753 BCE, an event which archeological evidence suggests occurred several centuries earlier. (Cornell, 80) However, his function as role model for all Roman male citizens has no less impact, and he cannot but clearly stand as an exemplary hero who embodies *virtus* at its most divine level. According to the historian Livy, Romulus was born from the mortal woman Rhea Silvia and the god Mars himself. By birthright through his mother, Romulus and his twin brother Remus overthrew the tyrant Amulius and restored the city of Alba.
Longa to its rightful king, their uncle Numitor. (Livy 1.4-6) Once they had secured their ancestral heritage, they then set out to claim their own new colony with a band of outlaws and rustics. Remus, who ascended the Aventine Hill, was the first to receive an augury when he caught sight of 6 birds. Romulus, however, took victory when he saw twelve birds from the Palatine, and began work on founding Rome. Livy also tells us that when his brother attempted to scale the early city walls which Romulus was constructing, Remus was promptly killed. (Livy 1.7) While one is tempted to find such an act of murder horrific, the anecdote of Remus’ death illustrated the importance of protection of the state even above the bonds of family. Junius Brutus, when his sons conspired against Rome, likewise exacted punishment by death (Livy, 2.6), and Livy himself, who wrote the account, must have been painfully aware of the struggles of brother against brother in his own day, when the Roman state was in constant civil war. Thus Romulus had set a precedent, showing that the welfare of the state might call for violent measures. He demonstrated such aggressive patriotism once again in order to populate his new city, when he led his new countrymen in the treacherous abduction of the neighboring Sabine women. Thus wars and violence were a key element of Rome’s beginnings. From her very earliest inception, Rome grew into being by the strength of her citizens and the blood of her enemies. The legendary first ever Roman vir was no less than the very son of Mars himself.

Echoing Romulus’ stern pronouncement “Sic deinde, quicumque alius transiliet moenia mea,” (Livy 1.7) were many more of Rome’s early champions who defended their new city. The tale of Horatius Cocles offers an outstanding model of traditional virtus. Horatius, who bravely stood his ground against the Etruscan foes on the early wooden bridge of Rome, was much celebrated for his self-sacrificing mentality and
courageous valor against the enemy. (Livy 2.10) In him we see an idealization of traditional *virtus* at its finest. Horatius is not merely a magnificent warrior who exhibits personal refinement in bodily strength and character, but he is also willing to utilize this excellence of his for the greater good of Rome. He quite literally puts himself before the city herself, and will not budge from his appointed position until she is secure. It is only then that he will return to win glory and honor. Had he fought twice as well and killed three times the Etruscans but for his own personal glory, Horatius Cocles would not have won half the renown than he did by surrendering his ability to the state. Regardless of whether he survived or not, Horatius had given his full potential as a warrior for Rome.

Finally, an incredibly important legendary figure of early Rome’s early *virtus*, but one much lesser known than that of Horatius Cocles or of Romulus, is that of Marcus Curtius. According to Livy, when a chasm erupted in the young Republican Roman Forum and threatened this important site of social and political exchange of the elite male, the Romans were told by the *auguri* to toss into the hole that thing which was the “*coeptum quo plurimum populus Romanus posset.*” (Livy, 7.6) When wealth and finery and the trappings of nobility failed to give the desired effect, Marcus Curtius, a young Roman man “*bello egregium*”, finally offered the solution. Suiting himself up in his armor and mounting his horse, he rode in full battle array into the pit, sacrificing himself for the good of his country. He did this on the basis that “*arma virtusque*” was indisputably “*magis Romanum bonum*” – “by far the greater Roman wealth.” (Livy, 7.6) The chasm, so it is said, closed therewith. This tale paints a clear moral that the quality of *virtus* was the most precious thing of the Roman state. For the young men of the Roman Republic, there was nothing nobler and nothing more heroic than to give the gifts of their strength and martial ability for the well-being of the nation. To exhibit *virtus*, then, is
more than mere bravery or courage as we today might think of it. It was not a singular ideal. It was self-sacrificing and encompassed the concept of the community. To have *virtus* was indeed to be a warrior, but one who firmly knows and stands for what he fights: Rome.

In his book, McDonnell examines how many examples of *virtus* in early Latin are best understood as “an aggressive type of physical courage” rather than “the courage needed to withstand an attack” (McDonnell, 24). The ability to endure trial and suffering, something that denotes inner strength of character, was not as important to early Rome as the prowess and ability of her citizens to achieve success on the battlefield. Boldly facing the enemy and defeating him were marks of early *virtus*, a notion which helped spur the aggressive warfare and expansion of early Rome throughout Italy. Self-sacrifice should not be seen as a mark of inner virtue, but rather, as a price that Romans were willing to pay for the sake of victory.

Therefore, later conceptions of *virtus*, which carried ethical implications, must be disregarded in our view of early Rome. Livy, who wrote after the period of civil wars and intense political ambition and rivalry, was more than likely highlighting the sacrifice and selfless character of Rome’s early heroes, striving to contrast the selfish use of *virtus* in his own time. Nevertheless, readers still see that brute strength and aggressiveness of early Rome were necessary for the defense of the city. Early *virtus*, when completely stripped of the historians’ bias, was therefore a purely military concept, with its roots for the preservation of the nation.

When we put aside the examples of great men and the moralizing lessons, there is a more sobering reality of history which Livy also records. In 387 BCE, the Gauls, who were facilitated by the weakening of Rome’s neighbors, descended upon the city,
captured it, and demanded ransom for her return. When the Romans dared argue that the ransom was unfair, the price was raised, and the admonition was given to them “Vae Victis.” (Livy, 5.48) The lesson Rome gained from this embarrassing defeat was at a bitter cost.

While the daring of Romulus or the heroism of men such Horatius and Marcus Curtius may have indeed inspired the Romans to aspire for the lofty rewards of virtus, it must not be forgotten how shame and fear were motivational factors as well. Never again would Rome wish to be subjugated and humiliated; if virtus was not cultivated in the hearts of Romans, however, she could expect further such defeats. Virtus was not promoted merely as some lofty idealization therefore, but was a practical necessity for early Rome. The conquered have no rights. And in the world of ancient Italy, where Italic tribes were constantly provoking and renewing hostilities upon one another, Rome quite rationally came to the realization that one must either conquer or be conquered. The narrow line between annihilation and survival for Rome rested in the ability of her citizens. Virtus was the lynch pin that kept Rome alive. Truly, virtus was the safeguard of the state, and it might well have been considered the greatest wealth of Rome.
CHAPTER 2

The Middle Republic: Virtus vs. the World

We have seen that virtus was a value out of which legends arose. The great figures of Roman tradition and lore promoted this ideal of military excellence which functioned for benefit of the state. Yet the ancient stories of early Rome give us only a partial glimpse at a much more complicated issue. If we extend into the further history of Rome, we will find that virtus was not only a value of the days of yore, but one which continued to shape the Roman nation throughout the centuries. Specifically, this chapter will examine the effects of virtus during the middle-republic on Roman society and imperialism, and, alternatively, it will consider how changing practices in both society and the military impacted the notion of virtus.

After her humiliating defeat in 387 BCE, Rome did not cower but instead took on an aggressive foreign policy of military conquest. T.J. Cornell summarizes that while “the sack [of Rome by the Gauls] was a severe psychological blow ... [it] was only a momentary setback and did not radically affect the pattern of Roman military success and territorial expansion which became evident at the end of the fifth century.” (Cornell, 318) In the following years Rome stabilized her existing allies in the Latin League, (Cornell, 322), captured Tusculum in 381 and won a series of minor Italic wars (Cornell, 323), and then dealt once more with an attack by the Gauls in 350 and 349 (Cornell, 324). This second war was far from favorable to Rome; the Latin League refused to send aid while
the Greeks were simultaneously harassing the coasts (Cornell, 325). Nevertheless, the Romans were not about to let themselves become the “woeful conquered” on this occasion. A Roman tribune, Marcus Valerius Corvus, reclaimed Roman honor and also illustrated the importance of *virtus* through one single battle. He called for a duel with the Gallic champion (Livy 7.10), and upon defeating him, won the war for Rome single-handedly.

Corvus here continues to represent the traditional idea of *virtus*, using his military prowess to preserve his country. Like Marcus Curtius, he is willing to give himself up to the battlefield for the sake of the city. Yet an important distinction is that Corvus is reputed to have led an extensive and impressive course of political positions after this victory. We are told that “*consulque proximo anno, cum annos XXIII haberet, ob virtutem creatus est*” (Livy, 7.10), and that shortly after this appointment to consul at an unusually young age, he was made *dictator* as well during a time of crisis. (Livy 7.16) In previous tales, the reward for *virtus* had primarily been the self-knowledge that the state was benefitting; we are told that Horatius Cocles was given as much land as he could plow in one day (Livy, 2.10), but we are not told of him earning office for his distinguished action against the enemy. Likewise, if we compare Corvus to Cincinnatus, whose selflessness to Rome in his assumption of duty and tactical leadership also saved Rome from defeat, it must be noted that Cincinnatus’ reward was quite literally his “selfless” acceptance of duty: his appointment to the dictatorship was not a result of his *virtus*, but in anticipation of it. (Livy, 3.27) That Corvus should be granted the consulship at the age of 23 is not only remarkable in that it broke the conventions of Roman political tradition, but in that it also shows a direct correlation between *virtus* and that political appointment.
Thus we see that individuals began to reap political rewards on the merit of proven *virtus*. *Virtus* was realized not only as a benefit to the state on the battlefield, but in the government as well. The logic of such a system is painstakingly clear: the men who show excellence in service to their country on the battlefield by proving singular leadership, proved themselves to be capable citizens to the state, and were thus popular candidates for public office; whether the battle itself was successful or not, the ideals and values of the general were what brought him political collateral (Rosenstein, 114). This connection of *virtus* with political reward is indicative of a growing competitive ethic among the elite in Roman society for glory and distinction. The power of the Republic was manifested in the political machine of Rome, but to successfully compete for positions in the state, a member of the elite had certain prerequisites to fulfill: “... the traditions of their class drove Roman aristocrats to seek success and glory, and military achievements were the most highly prized.” (Rich, 56) Brunt succinctly summed up this symbiotic union *virtus* created between the individual and the state: “There is abundant evidence for the value individual Romans set on *gloria*, but ... they could win no greater renown than by victories in war, renown in which the whole people shared.” (Brunt, 164) Hence, while *virtus* continued to primarily be a value based within the military realm, it nonetheless began to make associations with politics as well; by 124 BCE, Gaius Gracchus indicated that *virtus* may be demonstrated via political interactions, much in contrast to the *virtus* of the battlefield. (Cornell, 140)

Such a connection between the individual and the state made for a powerful motivational force in ancient Rome. The reward of *virtus* was initially the satisfaction of having an intact city and the personal renown of a hero, but as it developed the potential to bestow civic success and individual achievement, *virtus* would fuel the Republic’s
ever-growing imperialist mentality. Over the course of the her first few hundred years, Rome developed a pattern of nearly constant warfare and expansion; while the motives of such imperialism are many, complex, and ever in constant debate, it seems clear that along with the motives of fear, habituation, and material benefits, the Romans were persuaded into war by social pressures of the elite (Rich, 61). The state of Rome, in turn, promoted this individual competition, since she continued to reap benefit from the success of the rivaling aristocracy. Military success, which had once been a defensive necessity, was now sustaining the *otium* of Rome.

As *virtus* asserted itself as a key value fueling the elite and imperialism, it was itself shifting in response to changes within both the society and military. During the middle republic, the classic military *virtus* began to assume social implications and contain moral undertones in response to cultural assimilation. Greek influence had been a factor within Rome since its earliest days, and yet it was in the middle-republic that it begins to directly impact – and clash with – Roman society. After the Pyrrhic War in 280-275 BCE, in addition to the enslavement of Magna Graecia in the same period, Rome was inundated by Greeks (McDonnell, 78) and began to be directly exposed to Hellenism through language, art, literature, and philosophy. The influx of Greek culture brought about strong reactions in Rome, with some Romans embracing what Cicero called the “mighty river of culture and learning” (*Republic*, II. xix. 34), while others adopted the belief that “in every matter the Greek cloak should be subjected to the toga, thinking it an indignity that the weight and the majesty of the empire should be bestowed upon the allurements and delight of literature.” (Valerius Maximus, II. ii. 2)

Perhaps one of the most prominent Hellenophiles of the middle republic was Titus Quinctius Flamininus, hailed as “savior” by the Greeks when he restored to them those
territories which Macedon had taken over, returning them at the Isthmian Games “without garrisons, subject to no tribute and in full enjoyment of their ancestral laws”. (Polybius, 18.46) In addition to showing benevolence upon the Greeks in his generalship, Flamininus had assumed Hellenic traditions into his personal life as well; on the very first coin to depict a living Roman, we see the image not of an austere and clean-shaven Flamininus, as one would expect from Roman art, but rather we see him bearded and with idealized features that were common in Greek art. (Roman Civilization, 642) The victorious Scipio Africanus of the Second Punic War also adopted Greek fashions and behaviors into his personage; his political opponents made the criticism that “his dress and bearing were un-Roman... he strolled about the gymnasium in a Greek mantle and sandals, and wasted his time over books and physical exercise” (Livy, 29.19), and Cato, as one of Scipio’s staunch adversaries, was said to have denounced him for “his childish fondness for public games and theatrical performances” (Cato the Elder, 3).

As Scipio’s scandal demonstrates, there was also fierce negative reaction to the Greco-Roman movement. Cato the Elder, whose ascetic manners in dress, diet, and finance stood in opposition to the increasing extravagance of the middle-republic (Plutarch, Cato the Elder, 3), was one of the chief figures of anti-Hellenism. In his Natural History, Pliny cites Cato giving a very scathing indictment of Greek culture:

Concerning those Greeks ... I will speak to you in the proper place. I will show you the results of my own experience at Athens: that it is a good idea to dip into their literature but not to learn it thoroughly. I shall convince you that they are a most iniquitous and intractable people, and you may take my word as the word of a prophet: whenever that nation shall bestow its literature upon us, it will corrupt everything...
In other attacks against Greek influences, Cato is known for his refusal to speak anything but Latin in public when he visited Athens, feeling that “the Greeks speak from the lips, but the Romans from the heart” (Plutarch, *Cato the Elder*, 133), and that he opposed the study of philosophy, mentioning specifically Socrates, whom he considered to be a “turbulent windbag” (Plutarch, *Cato the Elder*, 23). While this hostile attitude of Cato and others like him provides evidence that Hellenism was not completely assumed into Roman life, it also gives testimony to the fact that Greek culture was a definite social component of the middle-republic, and one that was exerting considerable influence and change.

Not least of all would be the change Hellenism would have on the conception of *virtus*. Opponents of Hellenism might have feared, as Cato did, that Greek culture would lead Romans “to value most highly a reputation that was based upon feats of oratory rather than upon feats of arms” (Plutarch, *Cato the Elder*, 22). The reality of the situation, however, is not that Rome came to disregard *virtus*, but rather, she began to rethink it. Specifically, *virtus* started to take on the flavors of its Greek counterpart, ’αρετή. ’Αρετή although similar to *virtus* in that both connote a sense of prowess, was far from a direct synonym to its Roman equivalent. During the middle-republic Latin, which was a relatively “word-poor language”, adapted some of the Greek ideals of ’αρετή into *virtus*; for example, *virtus* began to suggest a broader notion of “general human excellence” rather than exclusively martial ability. (McDonnell, 107) It also started to make allusions to an ethical form of excellence; this was undisputedly a Greek notion, as the Romans of this time seemed to generally avoid “abstract ethical notions of right and wrong.” (McDonnell, 111) In his book *On Roman Manliness*, McDonnell argues:
As the traditionally warlike society of mid-republican Rome was adapting to a more ethically sophisticated Greek culture, it was inevitable that the meaning of a central concept such as manliness would also expand its primary field of reference. Because virtus certainly took on a variety of new meanings borrowed from \( \alpha \rho \varepsilon \tau \eta \), it would not be surprising if the decidedly ethical connotations of \( \alpha \rho \varepsilon \tau \eta \) also affected the Latin word. (McDonnell, 113)

This broadening of virtus to contain ethical implications was in stark contrast to Roman tradition, which tended to be less concerned with philosophy, and more with success; therefore, while it had begun to assert influence, \( \alpha \rho \varepsilon \tau \eta \) was still not the norm of the day:

… in a society as militaristic as that of middle republican Rome, not only was martial prowess considered the ideal of manly behavior, but issues of right and wrong were apparently not paramount, and an individual’s ethical failing might be overlooked if he excelled as a soldier. (McDonnell, 111)

Despite the fears of men like Cato, the Romans still tended to value action above philosophy.

The events of the middle republic would challenge the Romans to redefine their relationship between aggression and military success, however. As is cited above, McDonnell sees the Hellenization of virtus to be in contradiction to traditional Roman society, which valued feats ahead of moral principles. But in addition to Hellenization, another highly influential affair was shaping Rome during the middle republic: the Punic Wars. These confrontations with Carthage, which opened up Rome’s military renown on
a global scale, would test Rome as no other conflict with an enemy had before, especially via the figure of Hannibal. The Second Punic War was specifically trying, and would leave lasting changes in Roman approaches towards warfare. During this war, Rome’s use of the aggressive military tactics of old introduced such major disasters as Trebia, Trasimene and Cannae. It was instead the rise of cautious and tactical practices of men such as Fabius that Rome would both restore itself and simultaneously be “taught a practical lesson” through “a clear demonstration of how the foresight, logical thinking and cool calculation of a general differ from the rashness and bravado of a mere soldier” (Polybius, 3.105).

It must be understood that the relationship between *virtus* and generalship was of paramount importance, and not, as Polybius would suggest, a mere contrast with the bravery of an ordinary soldier. Roman generals of the middle republic had a complex connection with *virtus* that facilitated their renown and success in public life, but also won for them the distinctive *virtus* of leaders:

General who deliberately put themselves in danger during the heat of battle, who refused to surrender or even survive when all was lost, displayed a superior form of courage and self-discipline to that of their men, for theirs was the product of an individual decision, not something expected of them because they were part of a group. It was precisely this readiness to face extreme danger when no necessity compelled it that was acknowledged as the supreme manifestation of personal courage at Rome and that won decorations for valor, not the bravery of soldiers in the line of battle. (Rosenstein, 131).

Military failure did not necessarily destroy a defeated general’s chance for further
political career (Rosenstein, 18), although other factors, such as the “state of ... accord with the gods and the quality of their fighting men” might be brought into consideration for blame, rather than a lack of virtus (Rosenstein, 7).

Fabius, however, stands as an unusual paradox to Roman beliefs about virtus and victory: he was a highly successful general, but failed to engage aggressive military tactics, and certainly did not pursue unnecessary danger. This was a passive virtus, not one which charged the battlefield for glory of both state and individual, but rather one that concentrated wholly on individual restraint for the survival of the republic. Plutarch tells us that from early on, Fabius’ character was contrary to the bold and pugnacious spirit expected in Romans; he had a “grave and gentle nature” and “showed an extraordinary caution” that was ultimately founded on “a soundly based judgment” rather than impulse (Plutarch, Fabius Maximus, 1). Fabius’ reservations about engaging in aggressive combat with Hannibal tested the traditional Roman notion of war:

For Fabius, having made up his mind to incur no danger and not to risk a battle, but to make the safety of his men his first and greatest object, kept resolutely to this purpose. At first he was despised for it, and gave rise to scandalous insinuations that he was an utter coward and dared not face an engagement… (Polybius, 3.89)

Rome was unused to shying from a fight. Such behavior seemed to go against virtus and the very Roman identity, for which Fabius was publicly remonstrated by his own Master of the Horse, Marcus Minucius, that he was “conducting his command in a cowardly and unenterprising spirit” instead of entering “upon a decisive engagement.” (Polybius, 3.90) Fabius, it was feared, had left Rome devoid of virtus; he was accused of crushing “… Martios animos Romanis, debellatumque et concessum propalam de uirtute ac gloria
esse.” (Livy, 22.12)

Consequently, after several small successes against Hannibal, Minucius was appointed co-dictator with Fabius, with the Romans believing “that the ill success and want of nerve … had not arisen from the cowardice of the men, but the timidity of their leader [Fabius].” (Polybius, 3.103) However, when Minucius made a reckless attack only to find “Hannibalem et uirtute et fortuna superiorem”, Fabius came to the scene and forced Hannibal to yield. (Livy, 22.29)

If we might conclude that the Second Punic War had helped to establish a link between military strategy and virtus, we must nevertheless note that strategy was not limited to cautious behavior. When Scipio sailed to Africa in 204 BCE and brought about the final defeat of Hannibal at Zama in 202 BCE, he had directly gone against the advice of Fabius (Livy). He had opened the doors to an imperialism that justified itself for the defense of Rome, even when no enemy was immediately at the gates. The claim to virtus here was indeed aggressive in nature, but it still stood for the cause of preservation. Furthermore, the tactical approach to warfare that Scipio employed illustrates that by the end of the Second Punic War; the Romans had made a distinction between audacious military spirit and a more steadied, calculating enterprise of battle that demonstrated virtus.

In conclusion, the period after the Second Punic War was a key period for the reform of virtus. The heavy influence of Greek vocabulary and ideas, as well as maturation in Roman military strategy left virtus to be not so much the brute courage of Rome’s early heroes, but rather a more encompassing expression of military excellence and success that also considered intellectual and ethical implications. The Punic Wars were a major driving force for this change, since they not only demanded reconsideration
of military policies, but also fueled a greater need for slaves in Rome, many of which would be Greek, further promoting Hellenization (McDonnell, 78). Lastly, by 146 BCE, when Scipio Aemilianus concluded the Third Punic War at the same time that Corinth was brought under Roman dominion, Rome had established itself as the undisputed master of the Mediterranean. The Punic Wars would be the last major foreign threat that the city would face for over six centuries. (Lazenby, 225) Nevertheless, imperialism had only begun to motivate Roman military exploits. The growing competitive ethos that existed among the Roman aristocracy would seize upon military success as an engine to elevate individuals to singularity. In short, *virtus* had secured Rome an uncontested position in the world, so that preservation of the state was no longer a concern. However, *virtus* had also emerged as an important ingredient to becoming an *imperator*, a general who wielded tremendous military and political power. As individuals would take their political struggles to the battlefield and bring about the dissolution of the Republic, *virtus* would face a dark irony: no longer would it be practiced in the defense of the state, but out of desire to control it.
CHAPTER 3

*Imperatores et Virtus: The Rise of the Individual*

“… Scipio had passed over the salutation without taking any particular note of it, but after the battle when all the tribes hailed him as king, he began to give the matter his attention. He therefore summoned the Spaniards to a meeting and told them that he was willing to be spoken of them as kingly, and indeed to act in a truly kingly manner, but that he did not wish to be a king or to receive this title from anyone. After he had explained this, he told them to call him imperator.” (Polybius, 422)

This anecdote from Polybius, which is also recounted by Livy, gives us perhaps the first instance of a Roman general being hailed as *imperator* (Livy, 27.19). Whether this is the case or not, it is shown that as early as 209 BCE when Scipio assumed this title, the role of *imperator* was recognized as something quasi-kingly, a power that one man was given through his martial leadership. The honor, which was conferred upon a victorious general by his troops or the Senate and generally coincided with the celebration of a triumph, would come to inherit increasing importance and meaning of superiority in the Late Republic as a man’s military supremacy directly affected his power in Roman politics (Scullard, 81). As we look at the rise of the individual generals of the late republic and early Empire, we will examine how these outstanding men used *virtus* to achieve the singularity of their positions, transforming it into a tool for
advancement and a justification for political supremacy. It will also be shown how the two conceptions of *virtus*, one strictly martial in nature and relating to military excellence, and the other ethical in nature and deriving from ’αρετή, would be in conflict with each other during this period, as the struggle to define *virtus* reflected the struggle between orders and individuals of this period.

To understand the relationship between the *imperatores* and *virtus* in the late republic requires a brief examination of the political conditions that led to military reforms and the elevation of individuals. While the middle-republic had set the stage for imperial domination, the late republic would inherit the challenges of governing such a vast span of territory and its peoples. In addition, the political rivalries of the elite would reach their zenith and create bitter hostilities that pitted men against their own fellow Romans on the battlefield. As *vir* fought against *vir* during this period of civil strife, political chaos, and military restructuring, we see that *virtus* no longer functioned *ad majorem Romae gloriām*, but rather, it became a stepping stone that men used for their own *ambitio*.

To begin, we turn to see the legacy of socioeconomic troubles and political contention with which the late republic began. With the provinces of Africa and Macedonia having been added in 146 BCE and Numantia conquered in 134, Rome found itself governing a large expanse of territory. In the past, the Republic had conquered much of Italy by subjugating its native peoples and establishing colonies to assimilate the new regions into Rome’s political machine where loyalty earned incremental benefits (Crawford, 104). But with the acquisition of the new provinces and territory outside of Italy, “Rome adopted a totally different mode of control, where control was necessary: a governor and a standing army.” (Crawford, 104) The problem with this foreign policy
was that Rome’s new land was not being given to its people. The proletariat, which used to be able to move to colonies to get property and thus become *assidui*, now had no outlet in which to achieve this social upgrade; consequently, landholders were declining from as early as the second century (Crawford, 98). In essence, the *proletarii* were no longer recipients of the benefits of empire.

The cause of this was that upon his return from military duty, the poor independent landholder would often find that he had been stripped of his property by the oligarchy, which not only had most privately-owned land, but also dominated the *ager publicus* (Crawford, 103). It was exactly by this dilemma that Tiberius Gracchus first became so incensed, pointing out that “they [the plebs] fight and die to protect the wealth and luxury of others. They are called the masters of the world, but they do not possess a single clod of earth which is truly their own.” (Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 9) The *virtus* of soldiers, it seems, was being utterly spent and wasted. As the elite reaped all the rewards of imperialism, the poor gained nothing for their military service to the state. These disenfranchised Romans, now no longer *assidui*, were also now no longer able to be enrolled in the army, so that there was “a rapid decline of the class of free small-holders all over Italy, their place being taken by gangs of foreign slaves, whom the rich employed to cultivate the estates from which they had driven off the free citizens.” (Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 8) The wealthy, with their large *latifundia* managed by slaves, had no desire to share the *ager publicus* or to stop seizing land through extortionist means, let alone to give any property back. The woes of the poorer class began to pinch the entire empire, which was forced to lower the standard land requirements of *assidui* while also recruiting more and more troops from the Italian allies. (Crawford, 98)
Tiberius’ goals to amend the Republic by helping the poor were ruined, however, when he critically provoked the *nobiles*. When Attalus the king of Pergamum died in early 133 BCE and the Roman people were named his heirs, Tiberius rather hastily and rashly made a deeply partisan move that was the beginning of his end, giving this wealth to the people for agrarian reform. (Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus* 14) The Senate, which had traditionally handled foreign affairs before this move, was now irrevocably set against Tiberius and his followers. Furthermore, Tiberius’ previous treatment of his fellow-tribune Octavius, whom he had deposed from his position, had brought him a paradoxical dilemma: not only had he offended both the *nobiles* and the common people alike by treating the “august almost sacrosanct quality” of the tribunate lightly, but in doing so he had weakened his own position as a tribune. Thus, with the Senate firmly opposed to Tiberius and his own inviolability subject to his perceived loyalty to the people and State, it was only a matter of time before he met his death at the end of the year in violence. (Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus*, 19)

Gaius had no difficulty rising to a prominent position following the dynamic career of his elder brother. His policies, however, proved to be more radically populist and anti-Senate than any which Tiberius had proposed, and indeed it seems his aim was to “undermine the authority” of the ruling aristocracy (Plutarch, *Gaius Gracchus*, 5) His proposed laws to divide up the public land for the poor, supply the army at public expense, and manage the apportioning of grain were gratifying to Rome’s poor citizens. His reform of the jury-system, meanwhile, would steal some strength from the *nobiles* and give it to the *equites*, and his attempt to extend suffrage to allies would not only win him the personal endorsement of the Italians, but also help increase voting support in the Assembly (Plutarch, *Gaius Gracchus*, 5).
However, since Tiberius had helped set the Senate against any populist reforms, any progress which Gaius made was quickly undone by the partisanship which now dominated Roman politics. The tribune Livius Drusus, seeing the power that came with the populist movement, began to outbid Gaius for the people’s favor, and soon Gaius found that “his policies no longer appealed so strongly to the people, since there were now so many leaders competing for their favor” (Plutarch, *Gaius Gracchus* 12). Aristocratic competition had created the trope of the *populares* faction, which in fact was merely the elite fighting with one another for public support, the *populares ratio*. The other side, the *optimates*, were emerging as well. The figure of Opimius, a staunch defender of the *nobiles* and the Senate’s interests, was able to secure power among many traditionalists and influence them that Gaius’ program was concessive to an unruly rabble; unconstitutional *imperium* was voted to Opimius to “preserve the safety of the state and put down the tyrants.” (Plutarch, *Gaius Gracchus*, 14) Gaius, who had failed to be elected tribune for the third time, had no recourse to any claim of *sacrosanctitas*, and found himself a victim of the vengeful *optimates*.

The fate of the Gracchi illustrates the ferocity that partisan politics had brought about in the Roman people, and also demonstrates how the future leading men of Rome would have to make a connection between *virtus* and tangible rewards in order to win over the power of the people. Over the next 60 years between the death of Gaius Gracchus and the rise of Pompey Magnus, loyalty to a particular party would come to matter less as individuals rose to power and dominated the political horizon of Rome. What did matter for the rising individuals was that the competitive nature of politics took on an ambitious and avaricious quality, so that both the *nobiles* and the *novi homines* alike were entangled in a struggle for personal distinction. Two forms of *virtus* facilitated
such a rise to power: the newer virtus, shaped by ἀρετή, was witnessed in men such as Cato and Cicero, who were known for their service to the state through writing and oratory. The imperatores of the late Republic, who were the leading men of power, revisited the strictly martial notion of virtus, and manipulated this traditional value to their own benefit into a value of contest and competition.

A man who made a sharp political tool out of virtus would rise during the Jugurthine War: Marius. Jugurtha himself was a man to whom Sallust attributes virtus (Sallust The Jugurthine War, 15), but was supposedly corrupted by the Romans, “both men of undistinguished birth and members of the aristocracy – who cared more for wealth than for right and honour”, who taught him that “at Rome money could buy anything” (Sallust, The Jugurthine War 8). In 118 BCE, when Micipsa finally died, Jugurtha took the initiative and seized much of the kingdom for himself, killing his cousin Hiempsal (Sallust, The Jugurthine War 13). His surviving cousin and rightful son of Micipsa, Adherbal, fled to Rome for protection and aid. In the face of Adherbal’s impassioned plea that justice be dealt by the Roman people, Jugurtha had sent several envoys to the Senate with bribes; most of the nobiles were bought out in this scandal (Sallust, The Jugurthine War 15) Jugurtha was able to continue bribing Rome to his advantage throughout the war until the “incorruptible” Metellus was finally appointed (Sallust, The Jugurthine War 46).

The virtus of Jugurtha, as McDonnell rightly argues, is one devoid of ethical notions; Sallust seems to mostly attribute a martial connotation to virtus so far as it describes the individuals of the Jugurthine War; even his heroes, Metellus and Marius, are not “made out to be virtuous men” (McDonnell, 363-364). Marius especially champions a virtus free from Hellenistic influences; he claims an education of Greek
literature was not something that inspired one to *virtus*, and so he had never devoted time to it. True nobility, according to Marius, was earned not through upbringing, philosophy, or family, but through *virtus* of the battlefield (Sallust, *The Jugurthine War* 85).

His attack on the elite for their lack of *virtus* was a deeply political matter. Although he had been elected consul and was therefore part of the *nobiles*, he did not cease to attack them, but in fact “was quite deliberately making himself hated by the upper classes, and the people... kept encouraging him and urging him on” (Plutarch, *Gaius Marius* 9). However, it was this fervent backing of the people and his military skill that propelled Marius to become the foremost man in Rome; just as avarice had risen by the bribing of the wealthy, ambition had “no better supporters than the poor” (Sallust, *The Jugurthine War* 85).

Marius ultimately secured himself as a personal figurehead of Rome by winning the loyalty of the army. He did this by allowing the landless *proletarii* to be enrolled, “a class of people who used not to be accepted by commanders in the past ... the idea being that the possession of property guaranteed a man’s loyalty to the state” (Plutarch, *Gaius Marius* 9). The Marian reforms not only gave the poor jobs in the army, however, but they also promised “victory, spoils, and glory” for their services (Sallust, *The Jugurthine War* 85). As a result, the army no longer saw themselves as citizens fighting for the defense of their land and honor, but as people fighting *in order to win* land and honor. While he avoided the ethical *virtus* of the Greeks, Marius had encouraged a competitive *virtus* that fought not for the state, but for the general, who was the overseer of these boons. Marius’ military reforms completely changed the relationship between the soldiers and their commander.

This form of martial *virtus*, although seemingly harkening back to the traditional
Roman standard, was in fact working against everything for which Rome’s early heroes had fought:

…in the late Republic not only was martial virtus an insufficient protection for the Republic, it was threatening to it. Since the time of Marius Rome was dominated by a succession of men who gained and held power on the basis of military commands and reputations. Some of them extravagantly proclaimed their *virtus*; all embodied the traditional Roman concept. … But Sallust had decided that the ambitions of each had led, ultimately and inevitably, to civil war and the loss of liberty, and he criticized not only the men, but the value they stood for. (McDonnell, 376)

*Ambitio* would prompt the rise of another leading military figure renowned for martial *virtus*: Sulla. While he campaigned under Marius against Jugurtha, Sulla distinguished himself as “a man of large ambitions, devoted to pleasure but even more devoted to glory”, whose “sole concern was that no one should be his superior, and very few his equals, in counsel or in action” (Sallust, *Jugurthine War* 95-96). It was under Sulla that Jugurtha was in fact finally defeated, much to Marius’ chagrin (Plutarch, *Sulla* 3); Sulla then brought his military renown back to Rome with him into politics, and he became an opponent to Marius. This was an important evolution to the Republic, which was now being contested over on a personal level. While Sulla was an *optimas* and Marius a populist, these partisan titles only framed their dispute. Their main struggle over power came about as they wrestled for appointment to fight against Mithridates; essentially, they were both vying for the rewards of *virtus*. The contest between these two men brought about a series of bloodshed and violence: Sulla’s capture of Rome by force,
An important successor of Marius and Sulla was Pompey Magnus. As Marius had done, Pompey used his *virtus* to rise to commands in the Republic (McDonnell, 295). However, his form of martial *virtus* differed from that of his predecessors in that he harkened to a more “heroic” mode which had been favored by the elite generals of the middle-republic (McDonnell, 296). Perhaps the most prominent example of Pompey following this ideal, which was a strange combination of Hellenistic excellence melded with traditional martial prowess, is seen in his very own name: Magnus. This title was clearly drawing a comparison between Pompey and Alexander the Great (Plutarch, *Pompey* 2). Like Alexander, Pompey was a warrior upon a horse – an image that was “associated in the Roman imagination with heroic *virtus*” (McDonnell, 297). In many ways, Pompey was the most outstanding man of martial excellence that Rome had seen in a long time; Caesar himself comments on the exceptional *virtus* of Pompey, noting that Rome was kept secure “thanks to the resolute action of Pompey” (Caesar, 157).

The renown that Pompey won for himself in such conduct was not only ground-breaking in itself, however, but also in the political rewards that it made available. After his conquest in Africa, Pompey requested and received a triumph at the very young age of 25, despite the fact that the honor was legally due only to praetors or consuls, neither of which Pompey had been (Plutarch, *Pompey*, 14). Having sided with the *optimates*, Pompey was given *imperium* by the Senate after Sulla’s death to go squash the revolt led by Sertorius in Spain. He then caught the end of the Third Servile War on his return to Rome, and was able to steal the fruits of victory from Crassus by earning a second
triumph in 71 BCE (Plutarch, *Pompey* 14-22). Pompey’s true ascent to power in Rome did not occur until his war with the Cilician pirates, however. During this period he was voted *imperium infinitum*, essentially giving him undisputed power across the entire empire (Plutarch, *Pompey* 25). This unprecedented right to power became even more remarkable when it was voted to him again under the proposal of the Manilian Law in 66 BCE so that he could conquer Mithridates and Tigranes in Armenia and Bithynia (Plutarch, *Pompey* 30). While campaigning in these territories, Pompey merely crossed over and also conquered Jerusalem, so that when he finally returned to Rome, his third triumph in 61 BCE celebrated his annexing a significant portion of western Asia to Rome (Plutarch, *Pompey* 45). This would be the height of his achievements, although he continued to hold influence in Rome even throughout his struggles with Caesar until his eventual death in Egypt in 48 BCE. Pompey’s career was significant because it paved the way for one man to wield such infinite proconsular commands. This essentially unlimited legal measure of power was important in setting up the Republic for its eventual transformation into an empire where one man would rule as “princeps inter pares”.

Finally, to see the role *virtus* played in the late Republic, we must consider Julius Caesar. He is especially interesting in his approach to *virtus*. Sallust, in his work on the Catilinian War, considers Caesar to be a model of *virtus* alongside Cato (Sallust, *Catilinian War*, 53.6), yet Caesar himself refrains from making any direct association to *virtus* himself (McDonnell, 301). He does address *virtus*, however, as an important part of Roman military practice, and it occurs with regularity in his written accounts. What is interesting to note is Caesar’s relationship to *virtus*; rather than making direct attempts to live up to the standards of this traditional Roman value, Caesar is often the commentator and spectator of *virtus*. This is shown especially in his writing on his Gallic wars:
… it was a soldier’s battle, in which the Romans easily proved superior, especially as it was fought under the eyes of Caesar and the whole army, so that any act of special bravery was bound to be noticed…

(Caesar, 3.14)

Caesar, as witness to virtus, was only following inevitable logic. The Roman soldiers, after the Marian reforms and decades of fighting for individuals rather than the state, had developed an intense loyalty for their imperator over Rome itself (a testimony that would be clearly made when Caesar would cross the Rubicon). It was no longer for the glory of Rome that these men fought, therefore, but for their commander, and thus Caesar himself had the aforementioned power to inspire virtus. His generalship, therefore, was the judge of men’s actions. When two of his men, Vorenus and Pullo, rushed into battle in contest for virtus, it was concluded at the end of the day that “it could not be decided which was the more deserving for the prize of valour.” (Caesar, 5.44) Caesar writes about these matters also because he understood that “the virtus of soldiers is a central and indispensable element of victory.” (McDonnell, 303) Caesar makes a note of presenting battles as “contests in virtus” (McDonnell, 303), and promoted his men to individual feats of military excellence, and also the Roman army as a whole to outdo the enemy and “determine whose virtus is superior” (McDonnell, 303).

In conclusion, by the time of Julius Caesar, we see that although virtus had branched off into two different directions, both martial and ethical notions were used for political merit. The highly competitive nature of Caesar’s military virtus, would survive into the spectacles of the principate. However, we also note how, as McDonnell so ironically points out, the dangers of military virtus were destroying the Republic. Thus Octavian, who would come to assume the title of Augustus in 27 BCE, would once again
attempt to stabilize Rome through reform. The days of aggressive military *virtus*, the kind which early Romans had championed, had come and gone, however. The reform which Augustus would enact led to an age of elevated ideals. The destructive *virtus* of the Republican *imperatores* would give way to a Hellenic, strongly heroic, and idealized form of *virtus* for the *imperatores* of the Empire.
CHAPTER 4

On the Principate and the Game of Virtus

The call to military excellence would pose a difficulty as a new political system struggled to assert itself. The position of princeps was something singular and different from former roles of power in Rome; while unlimited control had been building up since the imperium infinitum of Pompey (Plutarch, Pompey 25), the fact that it was completely undisputed and that a dynasty would emerge from it made the principate a position that not only ruled Rome, but the entire empire as well. Yet the emperor was a man who as “princeps inter pares” needed more than ever before to stand for the people in order that he might rule them. His power rested in the contentment of the people, and this was gained by giving them the promise that he could provide for them both in times of war and in peace. Yet by the end of the Republic, “civil war and autocracy were, in fact, the legacy of martial virtus” which would lead Romans to call for a newer and “more ethical” kind of virtus (McDonnell, 384). This task of assuming the Hellenized virtus and directing it for the repair of traditional Romanitas – “Roman-ness”– fell upon the shoulders of the emperors. The princeps would be made to find a way to express his virtus in a way that would still promise his capability to the state; he would be pushed to invent new ways of doing so instead of on the battlefield, however. Thus, it is argued here that as principate strained to develop a new notion of virtus which would reinforce its power, one mechanism in particular rose to predominance in this effort: spectacles. In
particular, amphitheater and circus games played an important role in giving a new face to this ancient Roman virtue. Giving the people bread, money, and a good show – and using that show to highlight what qualities he felt were his most laudable – the princeps found that if he was unable to secure the people’s needs through martial prowess, he was nevertheless able to deliver to them their wants through the arena. To support this, it is key to understand how virtus was perceived by the principate as a dilemma, how the arena functioned to answer the problem, and by looking at several specific examples of emperors who used and considered it as the primary vehicle of public image.

To begin, before the emperor was pressured to look for such reform, the dilemma had to first be fully realized. When he established what was to become known as an Empire, Octavian made sure that he modeled the finest character traits of the Roman state which would be expected of him; evidence for this can be found by looking at his declarations in the Res Gestae. Although the entire document contains details relating the many exemplary qualities he supposedly embodies, it is in the conclusion of his accomplishments that Augustus finally reports:

...postquam bella civilia exstinxeram, per consensum universorum potitus rerum omnium, rem publicam ex mea potestate in senatus populique Romani arbitrium transtuli. quo pro merito meo senatus consulto Augustus appellatus sum et laureis postes aedium mearum vestiti publice coronaque civica super ianuam meam fixa est et clupeus aureus in curia Iulia positus, quem mihi senatum populumque Romanum dare virtutis clementiaeque et iustitiae et pietatis caussa testatum est per eius clupei inscriptionem. (Res Gestae, 34)

These physical symbols of the crown and the shield serve to remind the public that this
man was honored for his virtues, with the shield especially evoking the symbol of the *clipeus virtutis*, specifically associated with the possession of *virtus*.

By specifically making mention of “*virtus*” (*Res Gestae*, 34), and by confirming his ability as a military leader (*Res Gestae*, 3), Augustus proved that *virtus* was clearly worth his concern. With *clementia* and *pietas*, values which associated Augustus with Julius Caesar, reference is made to both *iustitia* and *virtus*, qualities of “the good old days” of Rome, days which Augustus claimed to be bringing back. But beyond making allusions to it in writing, or in displaying it through symbolic decoration, the clever Octavian made a further declaration that *virtus* was connected to the principate by the very name which he had fashioned for himself: Imperator Caesar Augustus. By literally making his praenomen Imperator – “commander” – Octavian had established a permanent association between himself and *virtus*. Lastly, in addition to his declarations, decorations, and nomination, he made sure that there was a strong tie between him and the idea of military prowess through the personal relations he had. The man responsible for Augustus’ military victories, Marcus Agrippa, became his son-in-law; he also made sure that his stepsons were “hailed publicly as victorious generals” (Tacitus, 1.3). The final result of all these expressions of *virtus* was that Augustus set a precedent for future emperors: they must also be examples of this excellent prowess, and they must somehow show it.

The reason *virtus* was key to the success of Augustus was because it was more than just an ancient virtue, it was immediately relevant to the security of *otium* for the people. The Romans, having just undergone over a half-century of political and social turmoil, would want nothing more than a promise – any promise – for “the enjoyable gift of peace” (Tacitus, 1.2). This precious “gift” of *otium*, “peace and order under a strong
government” (Brunt, 153), had finally been brought to realization under Augustus. With conclusiveness, he had finally brought an end to the civil wars. The great generals of the past had claimed *virtus* by giving such provinces as Italy, Spain, Germania, and Africa to Rome; but Augustus proved his *virtus* for a much more crucial issue to his country: he had put Rome back together after years of instability and violence. It was by his *virtus* that he claimed to have done this, and hence Rome would require *virtus* of its emperors: it was a sign of ability in a man to deliver the “enjoyable gift” of a safe, strong, and stable administration.

The successors to the principate, however, would find that such a precedent was hard to follow. Tiberius, following Augustus’ exploitation of peace for political approval, nevertheless did not make an attempt to exploit *virtus* as his predecessor had, and refused the title of “Imperator” (Suetonius, 3.26). Although he had given example of a notable military career in his youth, Tiberius conducted no campaigns once he ascended to the principate (Suetonius, 3.37); in earlier times, the proof of *virtus* would have been received, and he would have needed no further display of his ability. But the new supreme position of *princeps* required more; unlike the character of Scipio Africanus, whose early instance of valor entitled him to a lifelong claim to *virtus* (Polybius, 10.3), Tiberius was not so well received by his contemporaries.

If Tiberius did have any pretensions of showing manifestations of *virtus* during his principate, he surely failed to associate the Roman arena with it. His austere and miserly management of the empire not only led to a notable lack of public works, but also a much criticized lack of games; Suetonius relates how “he gave no games at all himself and attended those given by others only very rarely” (Suetonius, 3.46) Tacitus tells us that he had “various reasons” for not attending games, among them “his dislike for
crowds, or his natural glumness, or unwillingness to be compared with Augustus, who had cheerfully attended” (Tacitus, 1.76). It can be concluded from this that he most surely did not recognize any connection between either the races or arena games with the ideal of *virtus*. Tiberius continued to struggle in earning the approval of his subjects, caught in a position where he could not please the Roman people with the pledge of his old traditional martial *virtus*, yet unable to offer them a *virtus* of peace.

It would not be until after Tiberius’ death during the reign of his successor Gaius that the arena was used specifically to promote the excellence of the emperor. Games would become the mechanism by which the principate redefined *virtus* as a more personal and singular virtue – rather than a quality of prowess that ought to be strived for in every Roman man for the glory of the state. As Julius Caesar had done in his treatment of the Gallic wars, the *princeps* would become the spectator – and ultimately the judge – of *virtus*. Rather than exploiting Rome’s men on the battlefield, however, emperors such as Gaius would dictate how *virtus* would be exhibited to the state by organizing games. The arena and the stage were places of Hellenistic connotation, and portraying a physically excellent ideal of *virtus* in these places imbued it more than ever with a likeness to ἀρετή. Furthermore, the control of the arena allowed the *princeps* to ensure that there were checks to the competitive ethic of *virtus* that had helped to bring about civil upheaval in the past.

Gaius was met with expectations of excellence from the moment he became *princeps*. And as the sole surviving child of Germanicus, the grandson of Augustus and much beloved and celebrated general of the Roman people, Gaius must certainly have felt concern and pressure to “live up” to his title. His father had been likened to Alexander the Great, with Tacitus summarizing that “if he had been in sole control, with royal
power and title, he would have equaled Alexander in military renown as easily as he outdid him in clemency, self-control, and every other good quality” (Tacitus, 2.72). Here now was Germanicus’ son, with this very power. Would he fulfill his father’s place as this new Alexander of Rome?

Gaius’ very nickname Caligula or “little boots” implies how the Romans were judging him with the military in mind. Yet Gaius was no warrior. Suetonius gives us a description of him that would easily leave us to wonder if such a frail being was capable of the physical strength needed for fighting, let alone the will to actually do so. (Suetonius, 4.50) If he was to convince the people of his ability, Gaius would have to do something radical. Since he would not confront a foreign enemy, he would have to confront an almost untouchable national image: Gaius became the first emperor who directly addressed *virtus*. It was obvious that he could not completely ignore *virtus*, as Tiberius had. Yet he could not merely make a passive allusion to it as Augustus had either. Rome’s expectations were above that. While Gaius may be famous for his more outrageous actions which likely stemmed from his insecurity – such as his crossing the Bay of Baia dry-shod (Suetonius, 4.19) – one of his pastimes was more readily accepted into Roman culture: that of the arena. There are four important reasons why *virtus* was so easily molded to the principate’s motives through use of the arena: ancient tradition, the ability to manipulate visual rhetoric, the illusion of popular power and control, and the expression of a united Roman empire. In these dynamics of influence, the emperors quickly found that their ability to stage their rule rested not on conquering some foe on a foreign battlefield, but by winning over the masses across the entire vast empire. Gladiatorial games, which probably arose out of Etruscan or Campanian origins, had their original purpose in funerary ritual, which the Romans had adopted by the third century
BCE (Kohne, 11). Two men would fight, with the specific purpose of drawing blood as an offering to the deceased; evidence of this ritual is portrayed in Roman art, such as ancient frescoes from Paestum (Kohne, 11). However, other games, such as chariot racing, were said to have gone as far back as the founding of Rome, instituted by Romulus himself (Kohne, 9). While these games were primarily considered means of entertainment by the time of the principate, their basis in ancient tradition would have given a certain *gravitas* about them. This allowed for the emperors to manipulate a sphere that was captivating and engaging to public interests, yet also taken seriously as something which had been assimilated into Roman identity for centuries.

This proved immensely valuable to the emperors, who could take the arena as a medium for staging their own motives through the themes in the games. The Roman arena provided a place to deliver visual rhetoric – one could emphasize certain historical events or mythological examples in order to communicate certain ideas and emotions to the audience. “Battles” could be staged in spectacular shows to sensationalize the crowd with the sense of military glory and victory – just as Claudius had done when he actively acted the role of the general in such an instance (Suetonius, 5.21). Criminals could be punished in gruesome manners that reinforced social structure, and foreign cultures could be paraded in derision (Kyle, 54). This last effect was especially useful if the emperor wanted to glorify – and then identify with – a value he could somehow apply to himself. For instance, the Greek culture, which saw the hunt as an expression of strength and excellence (Barringer, 10) was widely used in the Roman games, so that eventually, by the late empire, Roman *virtus* had assimilated this Greek notion and was commonly expressed through images of hunting (Tuck, 237). Ancient heroes who represented this more individual and godlike style of prowess were used by several emperors; for
instance, in contrast to the representations of Augustus which emphasized a strong Roman identity in the figures of generalship or priesthood, the emperor Commodus has left us the remarkable image of himself as Hercules (Kohne, 26).

However, the agenda of the principate would not have succeeded in altering Roman ideals if not for the willing consent of the people. Suetonius explains that the emperor Claudius “gave out presents to the people with some frequency and also provided a large number of splendid shows... He would frequently urge the crowd to enjoy themselves with encouragements and exhortations, sometimes calling them ‘masters’...” (Suetonius, 5. 21) Domitian too made an extensive show of generosity to the people through the games, giving out large quantities of money, and also hosting lavish banquets for the people (Suetonius, 12.4). This impression that the games were for and about the people had potential to create a great deal of blind consent in the populace as the emperors sold propaganda to the people along with gifts of food and money. By giving the people a voice in the matter of a gladiator’s life, the emperor was given the rule of the rest of the empire.

Lastly, it must be acknowledged that the greatest illusion that was promoted in the arena was about that very notion of empire. At her height of control during the reign of Trajan, Rome’s borders and influence extended from the farthest reaches of Western Europe to as far east as modern-day Iraq, from the province of Britain, to southernmost Egypt. In such a broad sphere of control, ranging over so many peoples and foreign cultures, it was a challenge to assert Romanitas and give all people in the empire a sense of unity. The “man behind the curtain”, as he was, who had the power to interpret which values and ideas were to be extended to everybody, was the princeps. This policy in many ways followed the example of Augustus, who had delivered pax to a Roman people
striving for unity at their cost of giving him the right to administrate and organize that unity as he saw fit. Similarly, in a Roman empire that governed across expansive territory, a sense of *otium* was delivered through the arena at the expense of uniting around the supremacy of one man.

These four functions of the arena, therefore, made it the ideal tool for the *principate* as it sought to redefine *virtus*. Instances of emperors who utilized it are numerous. As previously mentioned, Gaius was the first to fully utilize the potential to morph Roman opinion through the use of games. When he first rose to power, Suetonius tells us how “he gave several gladiatorial games, some held in the amphitheatre of Statilius Taurus and some in the Saepta. ... He did not always preside over the games himself but sometimes entrusted the task to magistrates and friends.” (Suetonius, 4.18)

Through time, however, Gaius came to use the games more and more as an expression of his power. According to Roman historian Cassius Dio, he made frequent use of the arena to inflict executions on those he condemned to death (Dio, 59.10). He was also said to have made the revelation that “the people who ruled the world gave more honour to a gladiator... than to their deified emperors or to himself” (Suetonius, 155), an insight that betrays just how much influence Gaius knew spectacle had. He took great interest in horse racing, which also served the spectacular demands of Rome, and was said to cheer for the green party (Dio, 59.14), the people’s favorite. So convinced was Gaius in the power of Roman games that he actually partook in them himself, fighting as a gladiator or driving in a circus as a charioteer (Suetonius, 164). While such involvement was frowned upon by the Romans, and Gaius ultimately failed to win the support and influence that he craved, he nonetheless made the startling discovery of the potential the arenas offered to the emperors of the future.
Claudius, his successor, might have seemed to rule by a completely different agenda than Gaius both in the eyes of his contemporaries as well as to modern-day readers; however, by a closer look, one sees that he also seized the vehicle of the Roman games to assert himself. Claudius lost no time in connecting the games with imperial power; to celebrate the foundation of Rome, he celebrated the Secular Games after the style of Augustus, which included the performance of his son Britannicus and “soon to be adopted heir” Nero at the Circus in the Troy Pageant (Tacitus, 11.11). Nor did he shun from using the games as a place to go against standard Roman expression of *virtus*; instead of wearing his Roman toga to the gladiatorial games in memory of his father, Claudius assumed a Greek style of dress, a bold statement against tradition. Suetonius attributes this behavior to “his state of health”, since Claudius suffered from a lack of physical well-being (Suetonius, 5.2). Here was a man who literally could not lead armies, not merely because of his supreme position, but most of all because he was unfit for such rigors. Like Gaius, he must have felt pressured to stand outside the shadow of his brother Germanicus. Yet Claudius found greater success than Gaius in using the arena and other spectacle in order to prove a new kind of *virtus*. Instead of looking at the games with a jealousy for their influence, Claudius directly used them. In addition to the Secular Games, Claudius promoted many circus games “sometimes with animal hunts between every five races” and he also “gave numerous gladiatorial shows in many different places”, in which, as mentioned earlier, he used to flatter the people with compliments and shower them with presents (Suetonius, 5.21). He furthermore made the attempt to carry the influence of the arena beyond the common people as well, by making reserved seating for the senators at the Circus Maximus (Suetonius, 5.21). It could be said that the physicality of the games was truly embraced by this invalid emperor, as it was the one
place where he could deliver the faces of dying men to the empire, while at the same time
defying the traditional standards of *virtus* to such a degree that he sent victims into the
arena wearing the toga (Suetonius, 5. 34).

If there is any character who would have outdone Gaius both in insecurities as
*princeps* and also in radical attempts to secure his rule, it would unquestionably be Nero.
The traditional understanding of *virtus* not only posed the usual challenge of unrealistic
efficiency and moderation which had burdened the principate before, but to Nero it was
also a personal dilemma. *Virtus*, the highest quality of patriarchal society which called
each man to be his finest in strength and courage for the good of the state, presented
multiple difficulties to Nero. Most problematic was this issue of asserting his manliness;
for the most influential figures in Nero’s life were women. Nero had risen to power
through his mother’s cunning; his ascension to the principate was not reinforcing
patriarchal Roman culture, but fulfilling female ambition. The prominent master over
Nero was his mother, Agrippina. Tacitus relates her undermining qualities, explaining
that “complete obedience was accorded to a woman... [it] was a rigorous, almost
masculine despotism. In public, Agrippina was austere and often arrogant. Her private
life was chaste – unless power was to be gained. Her passion to acquire money was
unbounded. She wanted it as a stepping-stone to supremacy.” (Tacitus, 12.8)

Nero found escape from this feminine control through the bravado of Roman
spectacle, trying to convince both the empire and himself that he commanded a sense of
*virtus* and *auctoritas* alike. “He provided a great many games of different kinds: Youth
Games, circus games, theatrical performances and gladiatorial contests,” says Suetonius,
“... Every day gifts of all kinds were thrown to the crowds...” (Suetonius, 6.11). In this
way Nero might persuade the masses to believe in his greatness, but what of the nobility?
It is told that he once put on show “four hundred senators and six hundred Roman knights, some of whom were wealthy men of good reputation. Even those who fought the wild beasts and served as assistants in the arena were drawn from the senatorial and equestrian orders.” (Suetonius, 6.12) By placing the upper class Romans in the arena, Nero was declaring his ideal of *virtus* to be the new standard by which all Romans were measured. More than any of the emperors before him, Nero’s definition of *virtus* defied the original. There was a softening of the idea, no longer requiring martial confines, but extending outwards to include even public performance. Nero’s new value is best illustrated through the lens of Tacitus:

> Nero had long desired to drive in four-horse chariot races. Another equally deplorable ambition was to sing the lyre, like a professional.
> ‘Chariot-racing,’ he said, ‘was an accomplishment of ancient kings and leaders – honored by poets, associated with divine worship. Singing, too, is sacred to Apollo: that glorious and provident god is represented in a musician’s dress in Greek cities, and also in Roman temples.’
> There was no stopping him... an enclosure was constructed, where he could drive his horses... and they [the people] approved vociferously. For such is a crowd: avid for entertainment and delighted if the emperor shares their tastes. (Tacitus, 14.14)

One cannot mistake that Nero was an incredibly successful figure in using spectacle to reshape Roman cultural values. His extensive use of Hellenistic ideals, such as horse riding and chariot racing demonstrated his ability to hearken to a heroic kind of *virtus* that Romans had emulated in men such as Pompey Magnus, Marcus Marcellus, and Scipio Aemilianus (McDonnell, 296). Nero also had the King of Armenia brought into
Rome in a lavish spectacle, and, after the king had made supplication, Nero was proudly hailed as Imperator, as if he had won some great military victory (Suetonius, *Nero* 13). Most fantastic of his claims to *virtus*, however, must have been those surrounding his musical touring. His travels, which might have been likened to a campaign, were indeed about proving superiority. In Naples, Nero pursued his singing even through an earthquake, showing steadfastness of spirit (Suetonius, *Nero*, 20); he also traveled to Greece, and competed there for prizes of voice, not least of all setting up a singing event for the Olympian games. (Suetonius, *Nero*, 23) Nero did not miss an excuse to show his *virtus*.

One of the final examples of an emperor who understood how to manipulate the arena is that of Domitian. Domitian, the younger son of Vespasian, followed the rule of his brother Titus. As a young man he set out on a military campaign in Gaul and Germany, “although it was unnecessary and his father’s friends counseled against it, merely to emulate his brother in wealth and status.” (Suetonius, 12.2) At that time, Domitian had not risen to the principate, in which he would inherit his father’s incredible legacy to the Roman empire. In the rebuilding of Rome after the ravages of fire, Vespasian had decided to create the finest machine of Roman spectacle that imperial power in the city would ever need: the Colosseum (Suetonius, 10.9).

Once he had risen to the role as emperor, Domitian too took on this culture of Games. He is reported to have not only held “magnificent and lavish spectacles” in the dazzling new amphitheater, but also in the Circus; he was particularly noted for his staging of battles – cavalry, infantry, and naval – for public sensation (Suetonius, 12.4) He established a tripartite competition which was to take place every five years, in which the skills of music, riding, and gymnastics were promoted. At these events, Domitian
presided, dressed in Greek fashion (Suetonius, 12.4). Although Domitian had inherited an empire that already practiced a more singular, Hellenistic definition of *virtus*, such actions reinforced the principate’s values. Domitian, although he conducted several military affairs, enjoyed no celebration of *virtus* through them: indeed, rather than ride a horse to battle, it was said that he preferred to be carried in a litter. The sphere of excellence in which he defined his ability was through archery; he enjoyed showing off his skill by shooting multitudes of animals (Suetonius, 12.19). His *virtus* truly was manifested in spectacle.

In conclusion, having identified the problematic nature of traditional *virtus* to the principate, these examples of several emperors demonstrate both why and how Rome’s most outstanding notion of ability was so drastically altered over a relatively short course of time. By appealing to the tradition of the amphitheater, the emperor was able to evoke a sense of *gravitas* in his manipulation of the Roman people. The emperor also was given the space to aim an agenda or association specifically to the crowds via the themes of spectacles. The people, who were showered with gifts and prizes, and who were able to sway the emperor’s opinion over the singular life and death instances of the *munera*, blindly absorbed the propaganda and shift in core cultural values. And lastly, due to the expansive control of the empire, the principate was able to accomplish its motives throughout many provinces, establishing a sense of their own unique *Romanitas* in an empire that was struggling to be united. The overall effect was that the spirit of the Roman people, although it endured, changed with its values under the influence of the principate. Little had Augustus probably imagined what a profound effect his new system of government would have on the Roman world. For the fate of his new legacy of empire was ironic: Augustus had won the people by bringing a promise of peace, but his
successors would dominate by promoting a spectacle of competition, tension, magnificence, and blood.
Bibliography


