



The Urban Plebs

In the dossier of Tiberian senatorial decrees, the *plebs urbana* has two different guises. In the funeral honors for Germanicus, the plebs appears as an organized corporation, capable of assembling, contracting a promise, erecting memorial statues, and “signing” its name to the statues on their inscriptions (*T.Siar.* fr. ii, col. b, lines 5–10).¹

... *princeps* ... that the day too ... and an address ... and [the Senate] approves its zeal ... urban tribes and ... promised. And thus [the Senate] determines ... of Germanicus Caesar, in triumphal dress ... in the public areas in which Divus Augustus ... set up, with an inscription of the urban plebs ...

An inscription of the plebs to Germanicus survives (though perhaps not one of the commemorations mentioned in the funeral honors).

The urban plebs of the thirty-five tribes to Germanicus Caesar, son of Ti. Caesar, grandson of Divus Augustus, augur, Augustal flamen, twice consul, twice emperor, with collected funds.²

In the proceedings against Piso, in contrast, the plebs appears as a mob zealous to lynch Piso (*s.c. de Pisone* lines 155–58).

1. Cf. *RS* 38, fr. b, col. ii, lines 15–19: “plebis quoq(ue) urbanae aeq[ue---] / ritatem quae nihil ri[---] / ta modumq(ue) tempor[---] / plebi urbana[e].”

2. *ILS* 176: “plebs urbana quinque et / triginta tribuum / Germanico Caesari, / Ti. Caesari f., / Divi Augusti n., / auguri, flamine Augustali, / co(n)s(uli) iterum, imp(eratori) iterum, aere conlato.”

The Senate praises the plebs as well, because it showed solidarity with the equestrian order and indicated its devotion toward our *princeps* and the memory of his son, and because although it was fired with the most exuberant enthusiasm for carrying out the punishment of Cn. Piso senior itself, nevertheless it allowed itself to be controlled by our *princeps*, following the example of the equestrian order.

Tacitus describes the episode (*Ann.* 3.14.4).³ The demonstrations arose when prosecutors and defense had spoken and Piso had seemed to have cleared himself of the charge of poisoning Germanicus, and they led to Piso's being given a tribune of a praetorian cohort as a bodyguard.

At that moment, the voices of the people in front of the Curia were heard. If Piso was absolved by senators' votes, they would not restrain themselves. They had dragged statues [*effigies*] of Piso to the Gemonian Steps and would have thrown them down had the statues not been rescued and seized by order of the *princeps*.

The Senate treated the plebs, in both its guises, as part of the imperial polity: the plebs responded to Augustus's precedent and Tiberius's instructions and followed the example of the *equester ordo*. In so treating the plebs, the Senate recognized informal politics, in as much as neither putting statues up nor tearing them down was equivalent to expression through the comitia. Thus, the *plebs urbana*, with its two very different modes of collective expression, won recognition as a loyal constituency.

This chapter considers the *plebs urbana* as an actor in imperial politics, taking an implicit stand against some approaches to the plebs. First, it dismisses the false assumption that the holder of the *tribunicia potestas* was ipso facto the champion of the plebs (see chap. 1). Second, it tries to go beyond merely describing imperial aedilician activities and self-display. The argument that the imperial house monopolized euergetism (the devotion of private resources to public ends in return for public honor) is banal—and only partly true, since senatorial commissions managed, for example, water and grain supplies. Moreover, the desire of the plebs for bread and circuses is demonstrably not a sufficient explanation of its behavior. Too often, *panem et circenses* has been deployed as a transcendent key to everything the humbler

3. For a close analysis of events and the way the plebs forced itself on the proceedings and the record of the proceedings see W. Eck, "Plebs und Princeps nach dem Tod des Germanicus," in *Leaders and Masses in the Roman World: Studies . . .* Z. Yavetz, ed. I. Malkin and Z. W. Rubinsohn (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1–10.

classes did.⁴ This chapter abandons the more or less tautologous reasoning that individuals who showed *comitas* or *levitas* were popular. Instead, this chapter takes its cue from the Tiberian dossier, looking first at some examples of the plebs expressing itself as an organized body, then at its other means of expression. In addition, it pursues the theme that the Roman plebs could not simply be ignored or abused, because the plebs in some sense represented the Roman nation, the *populus Romanus*.⁵

Any Roman public appearance presented the young men to the *plebs urbana*. For spectacles, the young men were producers, presiding magistrates, honorees, spectators, and, in the *lusus Troiae*, performers. One category of benefaction, *congiaria*, deserves special emphasis. These privately financed cash distributions at *tirocinia* (the public ceremonies during which young men donned the adult toga and became eligible for military service) or as part of testaments payable on a smooth succession were transparently dynastic.

- 44 B.C., testament of Julius Caesar distributed by C. Caesar: 75 denarii
- August 29 B.C., triple triumph, distributed in the names of Marcellus and Tiberius: 100 denarii
- 24 B.C., Augustus's return from Spain: 100 denarii
- 12 B.C., unknown occasion: 100 denarii
- 5 B.C., *tirocinium* of Gaius: 60 denarii
- 2 B.C., *tirocinium* of Lucius: 60 denarii
- A.D. 13, triumph of Tiberius: 75 denarii
- A.D. 15, testament of Augustus distributed by Tiberius: 65 denarii
- A.D. 17, triumph of Germanicus: 75 denarii
- 7 June A.D. 20, *tirocinium* of Nero, son of Germanicus: 60 denarii
- A.D. 23, *tirocinium* of Drusus, son of Germanicus: 60 denarii
- May A.D. 37, testament of Tiberius distributed by Caligula: 75 denarii
- July A.D. 37, *tirocinium* of Tiberius Gemellus: 75 denarii

Exactly how *congiaria* are interpreted depends on who one thinks received them. Augustus said that his *congiaria* went to the mass of *plebs urbana* or *Romana* and, in one instance, to those receiving the grain dole (*Res gestae* 15). The civic calendars of Ostia and Cupra Maritima, however, said that two of these *congiaria* went to the *populus Romanus* (*Inscr. Ital.* 13¹, pp. 183 [44 B.C.], 245 [12 B.C.]). Why should Roman citizens dwelling in Ostia and Cupra have described these *congiaria* as gifts to the Roman citizens, if Ostians and Cuprans

4. Of course, material demands were a leading factor. For the most determined attempt to explain popular unrest in the late Republic in these terms, see P. A. Brunt, "The Roman Mob," *P&P* 35 (1966): 3–27.

5. See, e.g., Nero counseling restraint at Tacitus *Ann.* 14.45.4.

were in fact categorically excluded? Existing evidence cannot dismiss the possibility that *congiaria* were distributions to all citizens who were present—in effect, cash incentives to travel to Rome.

The difficulty is in saying who the plebs were. Yet it is certain that, like the *equites*, the plebs gained a corporate identity in the late Republic and early Principate. In different guises, the *plebs urbana* made the following dedications.⁶

Cicero *Phil.* 6.12 (43 B.C.): statue from the thirty-five tribes to L. Antonius
CIL 6.40323 (1 B.C.): *plebs urbana* of *regio* X[III] and the [*magistr*]i *vicorum*
 to C. Caesar

T.Siar. fr. ii, col. b, lines 7–10 (A.D. 19): [statues?] of Germanicus Caesar in
 public areas, with an inscription of the *plebs urbana*

ILS 176 (A.D. 19): *plebs urbana* of the thirty-five tribes to Germanicus
 Caesar

RS 38, fr. b, col. ii, lines 15–19 (A.D. 23): funeral honors to the younger
 Drusus from the *plebs urbana*

ILS 168 (A.D. 23): *plebs urbana* of the thirty-five tribes to Drusus Caesar

ILS 6045 (after A.D. 79): *plebs urbana* who receive the *frumentum publicum*
 and the [thirty-five] tribes to Titus

ILS 286 (A.D. 103): the thirty-five tribes to Trajan

This plebs was a privileged constituency that returned honors for benefactions and whose dynastic concerns were manifest. This chapter presents a hypothesis as to how the honors-for-benefaction exchange actually operated.

Four Roman inscribed monuments embody the public response of the organized *plebs urbana* to the imperial succession. The earliest is an altar to the Lares Augusti dedicated by the *magistri* of the *vicus Sandalarius* (*ILS* 3614; 2 B.C.). The reliefs on the sides of the altar depict two dancing Lares and two laurel branches framing an oak-leaf wreath (the *corona civica*). The relief on the front depicts three figures in the midst of a sacred rite: a young man with his toga pulled over his head (*capite velato*; Gaius or Lucius), a similarly attired man holding an augural staff (*lituus*; Augustus) with a chicken pecking the ground by his foot, and a woman in a *stola* holding a sacrificial dish (*patera*; probably Livia rather than the elder Julia).⁷ The inscription reads:

To the Augustan Lares; when Imp. Caesar Augustus for the thirteenth
 time and M. Plautius Silvanus were consuls; D. Oppius, freedman of

6. See C. Nicolet, “Plèbe et tribus: Les statues de Lucius Antonius et le testament d’Auguste,” *MEFRA* 97 (1985): 799–839.

7. P. Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder* (Munich: Beck, 1987), fig. 101.

Gaius; D. Lucilius, freedman of Decimus, Salvius; L. Brinnius, freedman of Gaius, Princes; L. Furius, freedman of Lucius, Salvius; chief officers of the district Sandaliarius.⁸

The second monument is a plaque dedicated by the *plebs urbana* of one Roman *regio* and [*magistr*]i *vicorum* to Gaius (2 B.C.).

The urban plebs that dwells in the thirteenth region of the city and chief officers of the districts to Gaius Caesar, son of Augustus, *princeps iuventutis*, pontifex, consul designate, with collected funds.⁹

The third is the plaque to Germanicus quoted earlier in this chapter (*ILS* 176). The fourth is a matching plaque to the younger Drusus.

The urban plebs of the thirty-five tribes to Drusus Caesar, son of Tiberius Augustus, grandson of Divus Augustus, great-grandson of Divus Julius, pontifex, augur, *sodalis Augustalis*, twice consul, twice holding the tribunician power, with collected funds.¹⁰

To understand these documents and evaluate the imperial *plebs urbana* as a corporate entity, it is helpful to consider separately three families of inscribed public monuments: dedications signed by part or all of the plebs, dedications by the *magistri* and *ministri vicorum*, and dedications by Augustus with donations from the *populus Romanus*. There is not enough evidence to say exactly what the relationships were between the three families—whether they should be seen as distinct or as different sides of a single phenomenon.

Among Roman inscribed monuments “signed” by the plebs, there are three different divisions of the plebs: the plebs divided by tribe (the thirty-five tribes), which honored L. Antonius, Germanicus, the younger Drusus, Titus, and Trajan; the plebs divided by privilege (the *frumentum*, or grain dole), which joined the plebs divided by tribe in honoring Titus; and the plebs divided by place, which honored Gaius.

Most is known about the plebs divided by tribe. The thirty-five tribes had

8. *ILS* 3614: “Laribus Augustis; Imp. Caesare Augusto XIII, M. Plautio Silvan(o) co(n) s(ulibus); / D. Oppius C. I. Iaso, D. Lucilius D. I. Salvius, L. Brinnius C. I. Princeps, L. Furius L. I. Salvius, / mag(istri) vici Sandaliari.”

9. *CIL* 6.40323: “[pl]eps urbana quae hab[itat] / [i]n regione [u]rbis X[III] / [magistr]i(?) vicorum / [C(aio)] Caesari [Augusti f(ilio)] / principi iu[ventutis] / pontif(ici) co(n)s(uli) [designato] / aere c[on]lato.” For the supplement “magistr]i” see Nicolet, “Plèbe et tribus,” 823 n. 59.

10. *ILS* 168: “pleps urbana quinque et / triginta tribuum / Druso Caesari Ti. Aug. f., / Divi Augusti n., / Divi Iulii pronepoti, / pontifici, auguri, sodal(i) Augustal(i): / co(n)s(uli) iterum, tribunic(ia) potest(ate) iter(um): / aere conlato.”

individual and collective corporate organization. To combat bribery, Augustus isolated the members of two tribes, Fabia and Scaptia, and distributed one thousand sesterces to them so that they would not look for prizes from candidates (Suetonius *Aug.* 40.2). A letter or transcribed speech concerning the consular election of Seianus from someone describing himself as a “tri[bul]is,” often taken to be Tiberius, and addressed to his fellow “contri[bu]les”—the members of a single tribe—was inscribed (*ILS* 6044; *EJ* 53). There is a body of additional epigraphic evidence for tribal organization (*ILS* 6045–71). Each tribe contained *corpora*, such as *iuniores* or *seniores*, and these might bear an honorific name, such as *Iulianum* or *Augustale* (*ILS* 6052–53), names they apparently took in the Julio-Claudian period. Both tribes and the *corpora* within them had elected officers called *curatores*.¹¹ The *corpora* could decree honors, in particular *immunitas*, presumably from tribal or corporate dues.¹² Under the Flavians, tribal *corpora* would erect honors to the dynastic *domus* (*ILS* 6049; A.D. 70). The tribal *corpora* intersected with other associations among the plebs, such as apparitorial panels, artisanal societies, and households, to form select status groups. Multiple membership in these associations was a way of enhancing individual status, as were other marks, such as immunity, being freeborn, or receiving the grain dole (cf. *ILS* 6063–71). Collectively and individually, the thirty-five tribes were imperial beneficiaries, receiving HS 3,500,000 in Augustus’s will, which suggests that each tribe received HS 100,000.¹³ A collective identity is also implied by the tribes’ honoring L. Antonius as *patronus*. As Cicero recognized (*Phil.* 6.12), for L. Antonius to be *patronus* of each of the thirty-five tribes was meaningless: to be the champion of all was to be the champion of none. But if the whole was distinct from, say, citizens outside Rome, it would have amounted to a group whose interests could be meaningfully represented. Being *patronus* of the thirty-five urban tribes would be equivalent to being *patronus* of any other community. But the plural *tribus* is ambiguous. In any instance, it could refer to the *comitia tributa*, the urban mass without organization, or the tribes organized outside the assemblies. In Sueto-

11. See *ILS* 6052: “bis hon(ore) in curat(ione) functus”; *ILS* 6054: “cur(ator) [per] consensus tribulium cont[in]uis annis duobus”; *ILS* 6055: “[curator] factus supra[gis].”

12. See *ILS* 6052: “cui populus eius corporis immunitatem sex centuriarum decrevit”; *ILS* 6056: “permissu pientissimorum tribulium aram posuerunt.”

13. See Tacitus *Ann.* 1.8.2: “populo et plebi quadringentis tricis quinquies”; Suetonius *Aug.* 101.2: “legavit populo R(omano) quadringentis, tribus tricis quinquies sestertium.” Cf. Dio 56.32.1a, 4. During the Republic, all tribes allegedly had *divisores*, or “bagmen,” always a pejorative term in Cicero, but by the Principate, scholars were questioning whether *divisores* had been actual officials (“utrum legitimos habent omnes tribus divisores suos, quos Plautus magistris curiarum . . . vocat . . . an divisores criminis nomen est?” ps.-Asconius *Verr.* p. 212, 24 St. [*TLL*]). *Divisores* are not attested for the Principate, either in inscriptions or in literary works (Suetonius *Aug.* 3.1 refers to the Republic).

nius's list of contributors to the restoration of Augustus's Palatine house after the A.D. 3 fire, for example, it is easiest to take *tribus* as referring to the tribes as organized collectivities, but it is impossible to be certain: "veterani, decuriae, tribus atque etiam singillatim e cetero genere hominum" (*Aug.* 57.2; cf. *Dio* 55.12.4–5).¹⁴ The roll call of donors—veterans, apparitorial panels, tribes, and individuals—looks much like L. Antonius's honorers and the legatees of Augustus's will.

The second family of monuments comprises dedications by *magistri vicorum*.¹⁵ The *magistri vicorum* appear at the intersection of religious, political, and administrative developments, which may be distinguished for the sake of clarity. At the religious level, *magistri* maintained the Compital cult, a stratum of religious organization between the strictly public (state) and strictly private (household), which Romans considered ancient (*Dionysius Hal. RA* 4.14).¹⁶ Augustus was credited with restoring the *ludi Compitalicii*, a movable feast in early January, and the Compitalia, when the Compital Lares were adorned with spring and summer flowers, respectively, on 1 June and 1 August. For the duration of these festivals, the annual *magistri vicorum*, who began their terms on 1 August, were allowed a lictor in addition to their attendant *ministri* and the right to wear the *toga praetexta*; they effectively became magistrates for the day (*Suetonius Aug.* 31.4). Augustus himself would watch "gangs of local competitors fighting haphazardly and artlessly in the narrow *vici*" (*Suetonius Aug.* 45.2). Their ubiquitous cult shrines and altars honored agricultural deities (Lares), tutelary deities against such urban phenomena as fires (Volcanus Quietus, Stata Mater), and other figures more or less directly associated with the regime. Ovid reports:

Rome houses a thousand Lares and the Genius of its leader, who provided them; and the *vici* worship the three divinities.¹⁷

14. Tacitus writes that after Germanicus's death, the "populus per tribus" exclaimed that the state and all hope were lost (*Ann.* 3.4.1): could that equally refer to expression neither at the formal comital level nor at the informal level of mass demonstrations but at the tribal level in between?

15. For Augustan plaques, statue bases, altars, and shrines bearing dedications by *magistri* or *ministri vicorum* see *ILS* 3090, 3306–8, 3612–15, 5615, 6076, 9250; *CIL* 6.33–34, 128–29, 283, 764–65, 30954, 36851, 40323; *Inscr. Ital.* 13¹, pp. 279–90; *AE* 1964, 74. For the diverse activities of the *magistri* see J. Bleicken, "Vici Magister," *RE* 8.a.2 (1958): 2480–83 (not complete). For the religious significance of their art see M. Hano, "A l'origine du culte impérial: Les autels des Lares Augusti," *ANRW* 2.16.3 (1986): 2334–81; T. Hölscher et al., "Historische Reliefs," in *Kaiser Augustus und die verlorene Republik* (Berlin: Antikenmuseum Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 1988), 351–400.

16. In practice, *compita* (crossroads) and *vici* (streets or neighborhoods) were synonymous: Pliny *NH* 3.66, the source for the number of *vici*, terms them "compita Larum."

17. Ovid *Fast.* 5.145–46: "mille Lares Geniumque ducis, qui tradidit illos, / urbs habet, et vici numina trina colunt."

At the political level, *magistri vicorum* were affected by state measures against dangerous associations (*collegia*).¹⁸ After successive late republican bans, though *collegia* remained outlawed generally, individual petitioning organizations were apparently approved case-by-case according to a *lex Iulia* that allowed them to term their activities public and to enjoy the cachet of an imperial charter.

To the spirits of the departed, to the college of musicians, who preside over public rites, whom the Senate permitted to assemble in keeping with a Julian statute, by the authority of Augustus, for the sake of festivals.¹⁹

Magistri vicorum, though not called *collegia*, advertised their Augustan re-foundations and dated from them, as in the inscribed *fasti* of one *vicus*.

When Tiberius Claudius Nero for the second time and Cn. Calpurnius Piso were consuls, the first chief officers: M. Caecilius M. f. Pal. Optatus; C. Clodius A. f. Pal. Assus, messenger; C. Sulpicius C. l. Chrys . . . ; M. Valerius M. l. Felix.²⁰

At the administrative level, *magistri vicorum* performed duties associated with the geographical division of Rome for grain-dole censuses and fire fighting.²¹ When Julius Caesar first “made a count of the *populus* not in the customary way or at the customary place” but *vicatim*, he did so through the owners of housing blocks (Suetonius *Jul.* 41.3). Augustus divided Rome into fourteen *regiones* under panels of praetors and tribunes of the plebs and into 265 *vici* under *magistri* chosen from (elected by?) the plebs who lived there

18. See Asconius *Pis.* (7 C): “ante biennium autem quam restituerentur collegia, Q. Metellus Celer consul designatus magistrō vicorum ludos Compitalicios facere prohibuerat . . .” (December 61 B.C.). For the view that the *vicus* organizations under the Republic were normally *collegia* and not *magistri vicorum* see A. W. Lintott, *Violence in Republican Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 77–83.

19. *ILS* 4966: “dis manibus / collegio symphonia / corum, qui sacris publicis praestu sunt, quibus / senatus c(oire) c(onvocari) c(ogi) permisit e / lege Iulia ex auctoritate / Aug(usti) ludorum causa.”

20. *Inscr. Ital.* 13¹, pp. 279–90: “Ti. Claudio Nerone iter(um) / co[nsulibus] / Cn. Calpurnio Pisone / magistri primi / M. Caecilius M. f. Pal. Opta[tus] / C. Clodius A. [f.] Pal. Assus via[tor] / C. Sulpicius C. l. Chrys[---] / [M. Va]lerius M. l. [Fe]lix.” For charters cf. *ILS* 3612/3612a: “ministri qui K. Aug. primi inierunt”; *ILS* 3613: “[m]agistri qui K. Augusti primi mag[isterium] ini]erunt.” For dating by the granting of a charter cf., e.g., *ILS* 3308 (A.D. 12): “mag(istri) vici Sandaliari reg(ionis) IIII anni XVIII.” For full discussion see G. Niebling, “*Laribus Augustis Magistri Primi*,” *Historia* 5 (1956): 303–31.

21. See C. Nicolet, *L'inventaire du monde: Géographie et politique aux origines de l'empire romain* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), chap. 9.

(“vicosque . . . hos magistri e plebe cuiusque viciniae lecti,” Suetonius *Aug.* 30.1; cf. Dio 55.8.6). It was probably through the *magistri* that Augustus conducted a count *vicatim* for the grain dole in 2 B.C. (Suetonius *Aug.* 40.2). It is also likely, though not certain, that *magistri* assisted in the distribution of *tesserae frumentariae*, tokens that could be presented centrally for grain.²² The *magistri* controlled the fire-fighting slave force from their refoundation until A.D. 6, when the seven companies of *vigiles* (one to two *regiones*) took over (Dio 55.8.6–7, 55.26.4–5).

Though much remains sketchy, it is apparent that the *magistri vicorum* were redeemed from any association with the late republican gangs and were given a central role in the Augustan religious revival and administrative developments. It may be that the *magistri*, not the tribes, formed the organizational substructure of the *plebs frumentaria*.²³ It is certain that, like the tribes and the *plebs frumentaria*, the *magistri vicorum* were direct imperial beneficiaries.²⁴ The *magistri* who engraved the surviving *fasti* proudly declared that Augustus himself had donated the Lares Augusti at the center of their worship.

Imp. Caesar Augustus, *pontifex maximus*, consul eleven times, holding the tribunician power for the seventeenth time, gave the Augustan Lares to the chief officers of the district.²⁵

The *magistri vicorum* also received a bequest from Tiberius (“plebeique Romanae viritum atque etiam separatim vicorum magistris,” Suetonius *Tib.* 76).²⁶

22. M. I. Rostovtzeff, *Römische Bleitesserae* (Leipzig: Dieterich, 1905), 41; citing his *Tess. Syll.*, nos. 490–500; reexamined and clarified by C. Virlouvet in *Tessera Frumentaria: Les procédures de la distribution du blé public à Rome* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1995), 309–68.

23. The only evidence for the internal organization of Julio-Claudian *magistri vicorum* is indirect: late republican inscriptions of corresponding associations of *pagi* and *vici* from Rome and Italy (*ILLRP* 699–704). These reflect collective decisions to erect structures and to produce festivals (“de pagi sentent(ia),” “suffragio pagi”). Note also that in the *ager Mantuanus* in 59 B.C., a collective of slaves made an offering to “[a]ug(ustis) Laribus”—proof that the epithet *augustus* was in use before the emperor’s assuming it as a cognomen gave it new popularity. There is no comparable evidence, direct or indirect, for the internal organization of the *plebs frumentaria*.

24. Only one scholar has underscored this crucial point. D. Kienast (*Augustus: Prinzeps und Monarch* [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982], 165) writes: “Aber auch die Larenaltäre, ursprünglich 265 an Zahl, wurden offenbar selbst gestiftet.”

25. *Inscr. Ital.* 13¹, pp. 279–90: “Imp. Caesar August[us, pontifex maximus,] co(n)s(ul) XI, tribun(icia) pote[stas] VII Lares Aug(ustos) mag(istris) vici dedit.”

26. It is worth noting that the traditional dedicatory vocabulary of spontaneity and self-financing—*animo, libens, merito, sponte, de sua pecunia, de sua impensa*, etc.—is missing from the dedications of the Julio-Claudian Roman *magistri vicorum*. Cf. the self-financing *magistri* of Verona (*ILS* 3601; 1 B.C.) and the Flavian and Antonine Roman *magistri vicorum* (*ILS* 3616–21), who were liturgists. It may be relevant that some Augustan *magistri vicorum* handled coin and precious metal: see *ILS* 5615 for *magistri vici* who set up and maintained gold and silver scales, *ILS*

The *magistri* were not simply financed from above, however. They seem to have been one link in a chain of gift exchange. Augustus donated cult images to *vici* generally: “on 1 January, all orders brought a new year’s gift to the Capitolium even when Augustus was absent. With these he purchased the most costly images of gods, such as Apollo Sandalarius and Jupiter Tragoedus and others, and dedicated them *vicatim*” (Suetonius *Aug.* 57.1). This 1 January ceremony was one of the most potent new monarchic rituals.²⁷ Augustus established it, perhaps when, in 19 B.C., he took a seat between the two consuls (thus detracting attention from the traditional ceremony of their taking of office). Tiberius initially returned the offerings fourfold, then, vexed by donors approaching him throughout January, attempted to confine the practice to 1 January and to be out of Rome that day, before declining offerings in A.D. 17, publishing an edict, and abandoning the practice altogether. Caligula published an edict and resumed the practice, showing restraint by accepting an *as* instead of a denarius for the manufacture of images from the plebs who received the grain dole.²⁸ Claudius ended the practice, which was therefore characteristic of the period of this study. If, then, the *plebs frumentaria* were the givers of the gift, and if the *vici* and their *magistri* were the recipients, then the *magistri* were effective beneficiaries of a tax on the *plebs frumentaria*. This hypothetical cycle would help to explain “who speaks” in the honors from the plebs of *regio* XIII and the *magistri* to Gaius (*CIL* 6.40323, above).

On balance, it is best to regard the plebs divided by tribe and the plebs divided by privilege and place as distinct organizations of the imperial *plebs urbana*.²⁹ The thirty-five tribes first appeared on the statues to L. Antonius. The *plebs frumentaria* emerged from the grain dole and comprised a restricted category (*numerus clausus*).³⁰ The thirty-five tribes could claim the universal-

6077 for a *magister vici* who was a silverworker; cf. K. Schneider, “Ponderarium,” *RE* 22 (1937): 2935–37.

27. For the ritual see Ovid *Fast.* 1.63–294; M. Meslin, *La fête des kalendes des janvier dans l’empire romain* (Brussels: Latomus, 1970); F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, 2d ed. (London: Duckworth, 1992), 142–43.

28. See Dio 59.6.4: καὶ ὄβολόν, παρ’ ἐκάστου τῶν τῶ σιτηρέσιον φερόντων, ἀντὶ τῆς δραχμῆς ἦν ἐξ εἰκόνων ποιήσιν ἐδίδοσαν αὐτῷ, λαβῶν.

29. Nicolet, “Plèbe et tribus,” 799–839, reiterated in “La *Tabula Siarensis*, la plèbe urbaine, et les statues de Germanicus,” in *Leaders and Masses in the Roman World: Studies . . . Z. Yavetz*, ed. I. Malkin and Z. W. Rubinsohn [Leiden: Brill, 1995] 115–27) has argued the contrary position, that the *plebs urbana* of the thirty-five tribes and the *plebs frumentaria* were identical; but his best evidence, the dedication to Titus (*ILS* 6045), is most easily taken as saying they were distinct: “Imp. T. Caesari / Divi f. / Vespasiano Aug., / plebs urbana, / quae frumentum / publicum accipit, / et tribus [XXXV].” Nicolet’s supporting arguments, that during the Principate tribes retained ancient associations with quarters of Rome or that *tribus* was synonymous with *vicus*, should also be rejected.

30. See D. van Berchem, *Les distributions de blé et d’argent à la plèbe romaine sous l’Empire* (Geneva: Georg, 1939); Viriouvét, *Tessera Frumentaria*.

ity and disinterest the *plebs frumentaria* lacked—a distinction parallel to that between the *equester ordo* that first appeared on the statues to L. Antonius and the more obviously interested companies of publicans. The thirty-five tribes and the *equester ordo* lent aspects of unity to heterogeneous collections. It is not surprising to find them side by side in the funeral honors for Germanicus and Drusus, as components of the imperial polity.

But this is not quite the whole story. There was another way that honors from the new imperial constituencies were presented as formal acts. In the third family of inscribed public monuments, a set of four plinths dedicated by Augustus around the time of the refoundation of the *magistri*, the *plebs urbana* is not named.³¹ The Mercury dedication, typical of the rest, reads:

Imp. Caesar, son of Divus Augustus, *pontifex maximus*, eleven times consul, holding the tribunician power for the fourteenth time, out of the gift, which the Roman people brought to him on 1 January when he was absent, when Iullus Antonius and Africanus Fabius were consuls, sacred to Mercury.³²

Since all orders gave 1 January gifts, and since the *plebs urbana* had long served as a symbolic surrogate for the Roman citizenry, Augustus was justified in saying that the gift came from the *populus Romanus*. But he was also presenting an effective tax on Rome's denizens as a spontaneous gift from Roman citizens.

In all, the arrangement worked to the mutual advantage of the regime, of freedmen who won a place in state ceremony, and of other privileged members of the *plebs urbana* who contributed to shows of imperial consensus.³³ What further political ideology was embodied in the four dedications to imperial princes? While presenting itself as a loyalist entity concerned with the succession, the plebs showed a notable strictness in employing only official titles (magistracies and priesthoods) and in depicting an official sacred act on the *vicus Sandaliarius* altar relief (2 B.C.). The scene has commonly been identified as Gaius's departure for the East; but P. Zanker has remarked in passing that it may commemorate Lucius's entry into the augural college.³⁴ Zanker must be right. Since he wrote, it has been demonstrated that Gaius did

31. *ILS* 92, to Mercury, 10 B.C.; *ILS* 93, to Vulcan, 9 B.C.; *ILS* 99, to the Lares Publici, 4 B.C.; *CIL* 6.458, to an unknown deity, 8 B.C.

32. *ILS* 92: "Imp(erator) Caes[ar] Divi f. / August(us): / pontif(ex) maximus, co(n)s(ul) XI, / tribunicia potest(ate) XIII, / ex stipe, quam populus Romanus / k(alendis) Ianuarii apsent(i) ei contulit / Iullo Antonio, Africano Fabio co(n)s(ulibus): / Mercurio sacrum."

33. See N. Purcell, "The *Apparitores*: A Study in Social Mobility," *PBSR* 51 (1983): 125–73.

34. Zanker, "Über die Werkstätten augusteischer Larenaltäre und damit zusammenhängende Probleme der Interpretation," *BullComm* 82 (1970–71): 147–55.

not take the auspices and set out until January of the following year, 1 B.C.³⁵ The relief may commemorate a slightly transgressive popular act, for the election of Lucius marked the first breach of the augural college's rule against members from the same gens: it may mark an instance of popular power imposing the imperial dynasty on the senatorial aristocracy.

This would be in line with mass popular expressions of the era. Though there is a great deal of evidence regarding mass expressions of the Roman populace during the early Principate, it seldom amounts to more than isolated anecdotes and is notably defective as to background and organization. Scholars have commonly tried to explain—or explain away—popular expressions either as mobilizations of support for alleged imperial and senatorial factions or as indirect appeals for perquisites from particular favorites. The following pages take a different approach, asking some general questions. What channels of expression could and did the plebs use—formal state organs (comitia), theater demonstrations, agitation outside theaters? What political tendencies did popular expressions reflect? What effect did they have on the regime and politics in general? How could and did the state respond?

Though the comitia lost independence and initiative and therefore real power, they were never abolished; they played a formal role throughout the high empire.³⁶ In some sense, the emperors encouraged the comitia. Agrippa completed and dedicated the Saepta Iulia for the *comitia tributa* (Dio 53.23.1–2; 26 B.C.). Augustus canvassed the tribes with his candidates and voted “as one from the people [*ut unus e populo*]” (Suetonius *Aug.* 56.1). Legislation was a vehicle of Augustan reform; inscriptions naming the leges he had carried, together with inscriptions naming the nations he had conquered, were displayed in Augustus's funeral parade (Tacitus *Ann.* 1.8.3). Powers were formally voted to emperors as part of the ceremonial of accession, whatever form precursors to the *lex de imperio Vespasiani* may have taken. It is difficult to know how much comitial ratification of senatorial honorific decrees is simply unreported, in the way Tacitus did not report the comitial vote on Germanicus's funeral honors.³⁷ But in general the legislative comitia became scenes for ceremonials of consensus, symbolized by their reported offer, in

35. See P. Herz, “Der Aufbruch des C. Caesar in den Osten,” *ZPE* 39 (1980): 285–90.

36. As is well known, a *lex agraria* under Nerva is the latest attested comitial lex; see *Digest* 47, 2, 1. The *comitia centuriata* formally continued to elect magistrates into the third century A.D.; see Cassius Dio 37.28, 58.20.4. The comitia formally continued to grant imperium to magistrates under Tiberius; see *s.c. de Pisone* lines 33–34. References in the *Acta Fratrum Arvalium* to “comitia trib. pot.” and Dio's phraseology in his discussion—ἐξ τε τὸν δῆμον καὶ ἐκ τὸ πλῆθος—should indicate that the *comitia tributa* also maintained a formal existence.

37. See Tacitus *Ann.* 1.83; Millar, “Imperial Ideology in the *Tabula Siarensis*,” in *Estudios sobre la T. S.*, ed. J. González and J. Arce (Madrid: Centro de Estudios Historicos, 1988), 11–19, at 12–13.

19 B.C., to allow Augustus to set everything right and to legislate as he saw fit, to call the laws he had written *leges Augustae*, and to swear oaths by their terms (Dio 54.10.6–7).

Electoral procedure was thought worth periodically reforming through legislation. Under Augustus, the electoral assemblies were occasionally capable of supporting candidates who lacked imperial approval, whether out of actual opposition, as in the case of M. Egnatius Rufus, or out of overzealous loyalism, as in Augustus's and Gaius's elections to the consulship.³⁸ There remained enough electoral contention that Augustus once tried to prevent bribery by paying members of two tribes (as mentioned earlier in this chapter) and, in 18 B.C., passed a law against bribery (Dio 54.16.1). In A.D. 7, electoral violence caused Augustus to appoint candidates (Dio 55.34.2). Augustus and Tiberius were praised for ending electoral violence—not for ending elections (Velleius 2.126.2–3).

Collective expression in the theater developed in two important ways. First, where the late republican theater crowd allowed politicians to gauge popular opinion that would be formally expressed elsewhere, the imperial theater became the primary and final scene of mass expression. Second, the theater became institutionalized as part of political culture to the extent that expressions regularly earned formal responses, especially imperial edicts. The plebs now used the theater to petition the emperor collectively.³⁹ In A.D. 32, for example, there were demonstrations against Tiberius in the theater over many days because of the price of subsidized grain. The Senate responded with a decree, the consuls with an edict (Tacitus *Ann.* 6.13). In the theater, the plebs offered titles to the emperor. In 2 B.C., the theater, where the crowd was decked out in laurel, was the focus for the popular movement to name Augustus *pater patriae*.⁴⁰ In A.D. 3 or 4, Augustus had to refuse by edict the title *dominus*, offered to him in the theater (Suetonius *Aug.* 53.1; cf. Dio 55.12.2).

38. For Egnatius Rufus, elected as praetor after serving as aedile, then standing for the consulship, when a consul in office suppressed the list of candidates, see Velleius 2.91.3–92. Dio (53.24.4–6) places the affair in 26 B.C.; Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.10.4) and Suetonius (*Aug.* 19.1) list Egnatius among the preeminent challengers to Augustus's autocracy. In 22 B.C., 21 B.C., and 19 B.C., Augustus declined the consulships to which he had been elected (Dio 54.6, 54.10.1–2). In 6 B.C., Gaius was elected to the consulship prematurely (Dio 55.9.1–3; Suetonius *Aug.* 56.1).

39. See Millar, *Emperor*, 368–75.

40. See Suetonius *Aug.* 58. Cf. Augustus *Res gestae* 35; Verrius Flaccus *F.Praen.* 1 or 5 February (*Inscr. Ital.* 13, 2, 1, p. 119); Ovid *Fast.* 2.127ff. Note Valerius Messala's speech in the Senate following the demonstrations, given "with the backing of all" [*mandantibus cunctis*]: "senatus te consentiens cum populo Romano consalutat patriae patrem." There is no reference to a comitial vote (if one ever took place).

While Augustus was watching games there, a mime uttered these words:

o dominum aequum et bonum!

Overjoyed, everyone approved this, and Augustus immediately refused the unseemly adulation by gesture and expression, on the next day condemning it in a very stern edict.

Tiberius refused the titles *parens patriae* and *dominus* and the epithets *divinus* and *sacer*, applied to his works, after he had put a ceiling on subsidized corn prices; presumably these titles and epithets had been offered at the theater (Tacitus *Ann.* 2.87; A.D. 19). Likewise, personal appearances and shows of support in theaters became in themselves political acts, answerable by edict or other means. In 13 B.C., Augustus upbraided Tiberius for paying Gaius the compliment of seating Gaius next to himself at the games for Augustus's return and upbraided the people for applauding and praising Gaius (Dio 54.27.1). In A.D. 20, after Aemilia Lepida entered the Theater of Pompeius with a retinue of illustrious women, moving the crowd to tears, Tiberius asked the Senate to drop charges of *maiestas* against her (Tacitus *Ann.* 3.23).

The most revealing and underestimated aspect of the plebs' role in imperial politics is that its violent demonstrations were recognized as a means of expression.⁴¹ That the plebs demonstrated because of famine, flood, fire, or fear of invasion is not surprising. But not all instances are explicable as stemming from material desires and fears; many demonstrations apparently had purely political motives or at least lack obvious self-interest. In A.D. 24, for instance, the plebs was outraged by the prosecution of Vibius Serenus *père* by Vibius Serenus *filis* and drove the son from Rome (Tacitus *Ann.* 4.29.2). On other occasions, too, the plebs exhibited a sense of justice, propriety, and precedent. In 22 B.C., when it demanded that Augustus be dictator, it implicitly looked back to Julius Caesar; in forcing Augustus to take control of grain distribution, it explicitly cited the precedent of Pompeius in 57 B.C. (Dio 54.1.3).

Even violence followed controlled and regular patterns. In particular, the plebs repeatedly extolled members of the imperial house. Protests arose in the absence of the emperor and forced his return. According to Tacitus, the mass was calmed by the sight of the emperor.⁴² In 30 B.C., the Roman populace

41. Cf. P. J. J. Vanderbroeck, in his otherwise excellent study *Popular Leadership and Collective Behaviour in the Late Roman Republic, ca. 80–50 B.C.* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1987), at 160: "In the Empire the problem of social control was solved because the emperors on the one hand received legitimacy by meeting the interests of the city population, for example by a constant corn supply, and on the other hand created effective means of repression in the form of police troops."

42. *Ann.* 15.36.4. Cf. *s.c. de Pisone* lines 130–32: "for which reason he ought to terminate his grief and restore to his country not only the frame of mind but also the expression [*voltus*] appropriate to the prosperity of the state."

traveled together with senators and veterans to Brundisium to meet Imp. Caesar, who issued an edict forgiving those who did not come to greet him (Dio 51.4.2–5.1). The people voted that “on his entering the city, the vestal virgins and the Senate and the people with wives and children should meet him.”⁴³ In 19 B.C., electoral violence forced Augustus to return to Rome (Dio 54.10.1–2). In A.D. 17, the *populus Romanus* of every sex, age, and order came out to the twentieth milestone to greet the triumphant Germanicus.⁴⁴ This pattern provides the background for the events surrounding Caligula’s accession, when “the whole *plebs urbana* was truly grieved by the memory of his father Germanicus and the woes of his house, so much so that they accompanied Tiberius’s funeral procession, sacrificing on altars and celebrating, calling Caligula *sidus, pullus, pupus, alumnus*” (Suetonius *Cal.* 13).

A recurrent motif was that the plebs used violence to force the Senate’s hand. The demonstrations by the plebs against the Senate may be said to have embodied the same spirit, collectively, as the lowborn individually insulting the *boni* while clasping images of the emperor (Tacitus *Ann.* 3.36.1). In 22 B.C., “The Romans wished to elect Augustus dictator and, closing the Senate up in the Curia, forced them to decree this by threatening to burn them to the ground. After this, they took twenty-four fasces and approached him, begging him to be dictator” (Dio 54.1.3). The plebs demonstrated against Piso in A.D. 20 and drove Vibius Seneca from Rome in A.D. 24. In A.D. 29, when Tiberius had written to the Senate from Capreae denouncing Agrippina and Nero, son of Germanicus, the crowd surrounded the Senate, carrying likenesses of the two (Tacitus *Ann.* 5.4.2). In A.D. 31, the support of the plebs for Caligula gave Tiberius and the Senate the courage to act against Seianus and the guard. As Seianus was led from the Senate to the prison, the crowd attacked and insulted him and began tearing down his statues. When the Senate, meeting in the Temple of Concordia, perceived the crowd’s disposition and the guard’s absence, it was moved to condemn Seianus to death. The crowd defiled his corpse for three days, threw it in the Tiber, and led the purge that followed (Dio 53.8–9.1, 53.11.3–5).⁴⁵ In A.D. 37, when Caligula entered Rome, the throng burst into the Curia, angered that Tiberius had named Tiberius Gemellus coheir. Caligula was allowed absolute authority (“*irrumptentis in curiam turbae*,” Suetonius *Cal.* 13–14.1). Lastly, in A.D. 41, after Caligula’s murder, the plebs surrounded the Senate, meeting in the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitol, and demanded *unus rector*, naming Claudius (Suetonius *Claud.* 10.4).⁴⁶

43. Dio 51.19.1–2, where the verb, ἔγνωσαν, should indicate a comitial vote.

44. Suetonius *Cal.* 4, a good example of *populus Romanus* not meaning citizenry.

45. Note also that Nero’s freedmen and *clientes* had been encouraging him against Seianus and that the plebs had earlier demonstrated against Seianus (Tacitus *Ann.* 4.59.3, 5.9.1).

46. The plebs again besieged the Senate in A.D. 61 (Tacitus *Ann.* 14.42.2, 14.45.3).

The cumulative effect of these incidents is to undermine any attempt to treat Senate and emperor in isolation. The protests provided a recurrent prop for the imperial house against the Senate and the senatorial aristocracy. Even the demonstrations for Agrippina and Nero, when the crowd shouted blessings (*fausta omina*) for Tiberius, declared his letter a forgery, and said that Tiberius would not want to bring ruin on his *domus*, were fundamentally loyalist. The protests were part of imperial politics. Violent coercion joined the procedures and symbols of state, such as the senatorial decree and the fasces during the attempt to make Augustus dictator. Violence was part of the show, as was Augustus's response, pleading with the crowd on bent knee and rending his tunic (Suetonius *Aug.* 52; Dio 54.1.4–5). Most importantly, demonstrations were a recognized part of politics. The protesting crowd could be treated as representing the Roman citizenry. Both Velleius and Suetonius said that the *populus*, not the plebs, pressed the dictatorship on Augustus. Velleius went so far as to connect the episode with the emperor's conservatism (2.89.4–5).

The ancient form of the *res publica* was called back: farming returned to the fields, honor to sacred rites, security to men, and the safe possession of his property to each. Laws were usefully reformed and advantageously carried . . . As for the consulship, despite repeatedly struggling to refuse it, Caesar could only decline it after holding it eleven times in succession. As for the dictatorship, with as much determination as the *populus* offered it to him, so steadfastly did he refuse it.

By acknowledging the plebs in the *s.c. de Pisone*, the Senate was putting a brave face on an unpleasant reality; praise of the plebs' restraint, like praise of the emperor's *moderatio*, was hopeful admonition. The real question is, was the plebs controlled? Demonstrations for the elder Julia in A.D. 3, which again show the plebs joining in "political theater," seem to have forced Augustus's hand (Dio 55.13.1).⁴⁷

When the people [*δημος*] zealously urged Augustus to bring back his daughter from exile, he said that fire would sooner be mixed with water than she would be brought back. So the people cast many torches into the Tiber. And though they achieved nothing at the time, eventually Augustus was forced [*ἐξεβιάσατο*] to bring her back from the island, if only to the mainland.

47. Cf. Pliny *NH* 21.3.9; Suetonius *Aug.* 65.3; Macrobius 2.5.1, 2.5.6.

In a sense, the violence at Caesar's funeral had launched the career of the first emperor; the plebs provided an indispensable prop. That episode was certainly a living memory in A.D. 14, when Tiberius warned the people in an edict that he wanted none of the excessive zeal that had marked the funeral of Divus Julius to recur when Augustus was cremated on the Campus Martius (Tacitus *Ann.* 1.8.5). It is possible to read the evidence as saying that just as the plebs forced Seianus's condemnation, so it forced Piso's. Tacitus (*Ann.* 2.89.3) makes a point of saying that the city mourned Germanicus, deserting markets and closing up houses, prior to any edict of the magistrates or senatorial decree; Suetonius says that the plebs could not be restrained by edicts and went on chanting and inscribing "redde Germanicum" (*Cal.* 6.2; *Tib.* 57.3). In A.D. 20, after Tiberius had urged the people to be moderate, cautioning them that of the many who had died for the state, none before Germanicus had earned such an expression of grief, the anger of the crowd met Piso when he disembarked at the Mausoleum and continued through the trial (*Ann.* 3.6.1, 3.9.2).

Throughout all this, the absence of police force against protests is striking.⁴⁸ There seems to have been an urban cohort at spectacles from A.D. 15 (Tacitus *Ann.* 1.77.1). That the potential for police force was not exercised may reflect the plebs' inviolability, or it may indicate that they acted as loyalists, kept within acceptable limits, and never stormed the Palatine.

Any interpretation of the plebs as an actor in politics, based on intermittent and sensational glimpses of a complex and shifting reality, is bound to be fragile.⁴⁹ Still, the evidence is sufficient to reveal two things: first, the delicacy of the equipoise that was styled consensus between Senate, *equester ordo*, and *plebs urbana*; and second, the power of Rome's fourth constituency, the urban garrison, which, though normally absent from politics, took the initiative in A.D. 41, when there was no emperor. Before I turn to the soldiers, the following two chapters examine two examples of extraurban collectivities: chapter 4 examines Pisae and the citizen communities in Italy and abroad; chapter 5, Mytilene and the other Greek cities.

48. See W. Nippel, *Public Order in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85–98.

49. For the transience of the urban Roman populace, constantly leaving and entering the city for commerce, see N. Purcell, "The City of Rome and the *Plebs Urbana* in the Late Republic," in *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2d ed., vol. 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 644–88.