Spreading Virtues in Republican Italy

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the development and the diffusion of Virtues in Republican Italy. By ‘Virtues’ I mean divinities who share their name with concepts, like Salus, Victoria, Concordia, et cetera. In ancient literary sources that give definitions of these divinities, they are not said to be identical with the concepts they are named after; for example, Victoria is the goddess who bestows victory, and there is, therefore, a distinction between the divinity and the benefit conceded. Nevertheless, it is clear that the goddess and the concept are strictly correlated. It is this strong relationship which potentially makes the study of this kind of divinity a particularly important tool for understanding the cultural history of Republican Italy.

This paper will address several questions. The first one is whether or not Virtues played any role in the creation of a cultural koine in Ancient Italy. I shall consider if, and why, different towns, communities, and peoples tried to appropriate these conceptual divinities, and whether or not they were associated with Roman identity and connected to Roman political power. In other words I shall look at phenomena of Hellenization and Romanisation. The traditional model, as formulated by Fears in the eighties, tended to describe the development and the diffusion of these goddesses as follows: the Virtues come from the Greeks, and were introduced by the Romans in a conscious Hellenising act. The obvious consequence is that the Romans spread them through the rest of Italy, as if the Romans had direct access to the Greek East.

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2 Fears (1981, 875–7).

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from which their fellow Italians were precluded. When Fears elaborated this model, he was following what was then the scholarly orthodoxy on the phenomena of Hellenization and Romanization in Italy, i.e. that Hellenization and Romanization were two parallel phenomena, and Hellenistic culture was spread in Italy through Roman influence. This whole academic reconstruction is now in crisis. There may be instances in which a Greek influence on the early development of some of these divinities could be detected, but this is quite rare. The second part of the equation, however, is still firmly rooted in modern scholarship, and we find in several recent and excellent publications the assumption that every manifestation of the goddess Victoria, for example, must always be interpreted as the product of Roman influence, one way or another.

Wallace-Hadrill has recently proposed to read cultural change in Republican Italy using the model of bilingualism, rather than Hellenization or Romanization. Wallace-Hadrill takes language as an important marker of identity, but recognizes that “language is by no means the only marker, not even a necessary marker; its potency in this respect lies in the close association between language and the concepts it expresses”. What is implied is that the instruments employed by linguists to interpret a bilingual text might also be used with profit by historians to read other types of evidence, such as archaeology, in order to analyse cultural phenomena. Although Osborne warned of the dangers and difficulties of this approach, I find it cogent to the subject of this paper. Wallace-Hadrill underlined the close relationship between language and concepts, and we are dealing here with divinities who are also concepts. Clark recently underlined that divine Virtues or Qualities were probably accessible to a wider audience because they were located in the intersection between concepts, languages, and religion.

When considering the conceptual aspect of Virtues, it is essential to keep in mind the essential work of Koselleck, which I find particularly useful for historical studies. Starting from the triad word-concept-object, Koselleck argues that concepts “possess a substantial claim to generality and always have many meanings—in historical science, occasionally in modalities other than

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4 E.g. Stek (2013, 346).
7 Osborne (2012).
8 Clark (2007, 16).