EDUCATION IN THE ROMAN REPUBLIC: CREATING TRADITIONS*

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Like many Ciceronian dialogues, On the Republic presents a Greek legacy overlaid with Roman ideas. At its most basic level this treatise, a pragmatic rendering of Plato’s dialogue of the same name, embodies a conflict between the theoretical Greeks and the practical Romans. Scholars since antiquity repeat this dichotomy: the Greeks created drama and metaphysics, while the Romans perfected sewer systems and legal codes. In a fragmentary section of Cicero’s discussion, we hear the speaker Scipio Aemilianus as he recounts the wise provisions that allow Romans to live in a state of blessedness and honor (beate et honeste vivendi societatem). First on the list is the Roman model for learning, which is also the only feature of Roman society receiving disapproval from Polybius, companion of Scipio and transplanted Greek. Unlike its Greek counterpart, Scipio says proudly, Roman education is neither fixed by law, nor set forth publicly, nor uniform.\(^1\) Scipio proceeds to defend the Roman model—and it is at this point that our text breaks off: “Well, you see . . .” (nam . . .).

I propose to fill this lacuna, not by speculating over what Cicero’s speaker might have argued, but by showing the ways in which the Romans selectively fashioned Greek educational principles into a uniquely Roman form of citizen training. Employing recent scholarship, I shall challenge Marrou’s account by arguing that the Romans of the Republic did not so much adopt the Hellenistic model of education as naturalize it, absorbing the attractive aspects into their own

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\(^1\) Cic. Rep. 4.3: principio disciplinam puere imperius, de qua Graeci multum frustra laborant, et in qua una Polybius noster hospes nostrorum institutorum negligentiam accusat, nuliam certam aut destinatam legibus aut publice expositam aut unam omnium esse voluerant. nam . . . (compare Polybius’ remarks on this system at Polyb. 31.31.2). For the characteristics of public education in the Hellenistic Greek world, see Marrou (1956) 112–3, Morgan (1998) 25–6.
developing society while discarding those less pleasing. Hence I shall concentrate not on what was taught and in what settings, but on who did the teaching, who was being educated, and for what selective ends knowledge was used. Roman education emerges not as the archaic throwback perceived by Polybius (and later, Marrou), but as a hybrid of Roman institutional myths and Greek pedagogical systems. I close by speculating on how this hybrid form served to create and validate those characteristics that constituted a proper Roman male of the urban elite.

Basis of Roman Education

The deficiencies Polybius identifies were real and were felt beyond the sphere of pedagogy. Lack of state support also accounts for the absence of public libraries until 38 BC, with the result that even men of learning such as Cicero needed to rely on friends and a cadre of personal copyists for texts; the situation for the less prominent must have been proportionately more difficult. The majority of the plebs, for example, seems to have acquired its knowledge of historical events and political institutions not from formal instruction, but from attendance at public spectacles such as theater and oratory. But lack of a formal system of education at the level of the state does not mean the state does not control education. For education in Roman society—as perhaps in every society—serves not to democratize the population, but to replicate or re-produce the already existing social system. This form of social reproduction through pedagogy, moreover, does not simply entail the acculturation of citizens. For accompanying any acculturation that does occur is a lack of acknowledgment of how education replicates social structures, a lack of acknowledgment theorists have termed “mis-recognition.” Extant texts of the Republic, for example, place great stress on an individual’s ingenium, the inborn quality guaranteed by nature.

2 Bonner (1977) provides a thorough overview of the Roman curriculum and the settings of education.
3 The critique in Bonner (1977) 328 parallels that of Polybius to a remarkable degree; see too Pseudo-Apollonius Ep. 54.
5 Horsfall (1996).