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Gabe Kilzer

University of North Dakota

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Dramaturgical History: The Roman Triumph



Gabe Kilzer*

Abstract This paper examines an ancient Roman ceremony, the Triumph, and explains the effect this ritual had on Roman civilization during the Empire and the effects it still has on our historical interpretation of that society. Using Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgy, I compare the leaders of Rome to actors on a stage playing to an audience. In this paper, I argue that the Triumph, which was a ceremony dedicated to the creation of a "God amongst men" in a conquering general, fueled a reciprocal relationship between the actions of society and the way in which we remember the Empire. Achieving a record in historical texts was the primary goal for those who sought immortality; and to attain this they had to be uncommon in a world of commoners. Thus, the imperialistic drive of Roman leaders was not simply about war, it was about becoming a hero of Rome by stretching their empire as far as possible during their reign. The Triumph was the way in which Roman leaders would make sure that the audience, in a controlled environment, would witness this character created through war.

INTRODUCTION

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women are merely players."
- William Shakespeare -

Our knowledge of the world is the product of voice and pen. Historians pass on verbal memories and literary recordings of individuals and groups whose impact on past and present civilizations is undeniable. Therefore, a sociological examination of history is a step forward towards a further understanding of civilization's evolution. By tracking the actions of individuals along with the consequences of those actions using sociological theory it is possible to determine the impact of certain events on past and present society. Descriptions of civilization during the Roman Empire (27BC-476AD) are a perfect example of how the contextual setting surrounding the individuals within affects historical interpretations. Driven by the desire to

* Gabe Kilzer, University of North Dakota, Department of Sociology, Grand Forks, ND 58203-7136; e-mail: gabriel.kilzer@und.edu

create a legacy worthy of documentation, this society's fascination with military power and imperialism caused many Roman leaders to conquer at all costs. This paper explains how one specific ceremony, the Roman Triumph, had the ability to create an immortal god, and erase the mortal masses.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND APPLICATION

Applying dramaturgical theory to this point in time offers an explanation and understanding of a Roman leader's dramatic actions as they were attempting to entertain the mob and achieve everlasting glory. Erving Goffman's, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), offers the interpretive theory of dramaturgy which compares those holding power during the time of the empire to actors on a stage playing to an audience. Within this theatric analogy, actors use impression management methods to switch between front and back stage roles in order to promote their ideal self to the audience. These roles depend on the setting, or physical surroundings, in which the actor will perform for the audience. Once the actor determines the setting, they will begin to create a personal front with whom the audience is able to connect. Using costumes to manipulate the actor's appearance along with altering certain mannerisms, the actor is able to establish their role. With the help of teammates, or co-actors, the actor's screenplay of events becomes reality creating a lasting impression on those serving as the audience.

History is a part of the natural world and consists of both physical (e.g. books) and mental (e.g. memories) states. Therefore, by using a naturalist approach similar to the ancient writer Pliny the Elder (23AD-79AD), author of the encyclopedia *Historia Naturalis*, a sociological interpretation of historical literature and architecture illustrates the effects of dramatic historical recordings on the beliefs and actions of Roman society. Ancient historians Polybius (203BC-120BC), Livy (59BC-17AD), Tacitus (56AD-120AD), and Appian (95AD-165AD) provide ancient

literary descriptions and interpretations of what the Triumph means to the Empire's imperialistic society. The "Arch of Titus" (81AD) is a visual depiction of the ceremony that allows for modern interpretation of the triumphal procession alongside the aforementioned literature. Focusing on the ceremony under examination, H.S. Versnel's, *Triumphus* (1970), provides both an extensive description of the Roman Triumph along with a modern interpretation of its meaning in the ancient world. Keith Hopkins outlines the social context surrounding the citizens of Rome in, *Conquerors and Slaves* (1978), and, *Death and Renewal* (1983), providing insight into what it is like to live in Rome.

Analyzing Past and Present Evidence:

During the Roman Empire the term *Imperator* described an individual who was able to command a standing army. Their control over an army was only applicable outside of the city walls, however. Once they were within the walls of Rome they were no longer able to maintain their command. The usual amount of time given to an *Imperator* by the Senate was two years, unless they applied for another term. After two years, the *Imperator* relinquished control of the troops to the Senate until they named another person to the position. The number of active *Imperators* varied during the Empire from two to eight depending on the emperor's agenda and ability to pass legislation accordingly (Polybius 1975). These laws caused many Roman generals to create war as they only had a certain amount of time to earn the highest honor given to an *Imperator*, the Roman Triumph.

Winning a significant victory on the battlefield over an adversary declared by the people as an enemy of Rome was the only way to apply for the right to a Triumph (Livy 1883:28, 38). Having met this criterion, an *Imperator* could display their achievements to the public by will of the Senate (Polybius 1975:6, 15). Roman leaders sought for this type of public recognition that it may have been a reason for the imperialist nature of that society.

Similar to a modern day parade, the Roman Triumph was a ceremonial procession celebrating an *Imperator's* successful extension and protection of the Roman way of life (Versnel 1970). A ceremony displaying spoils of war was not enough, however. By manipulating the setting in which the audience witnessed the act, the *Imperator* manufactured an image of himself to display to the citizens of Rome. This "self" was a creation borne from the *Imperator's* knowledge of the Romans' love for grandeur. The Senate and citizens of Rome did not want to hold a ceremony simply to praise a victorious general. Instead, they sought the public appearance of a conquering hero that demanded even the Gods' admiration and respect. Roman leaders knew these expectations and acted accordingly in order to create their legacy. Thus the creation of a dramatic personal front was not uncommon as the context created by the idea of an Empire led by the Gods defined the *Imperator's* role prior to taking command of any army.

Historical recordings of godlike heroes prior to the founding of Rome are one of the many reasons for the citizens' grand expectations of leaders. Epic poetry, which marked the beginning of historical documentation, described men who were equal to the Gods because of their ability to win battles and overcome great odds. In this context, Homer's hero Aeneas is comparable to Livy's Romulus and Remus as these individuals became legends by achieving public success. In his book, *From the Founding of the City* (1883), Livy states, "the traditions of what happened prior to the foundation of the City or whilst it was being built are more fitted to adorn the creations of the poet than that of the authentic records of the historian." On many occasions, Livy also writes that if any city should hold a claim to be divine, it should be Rome (1883). The ability to interact with the Gods was essential to the citizens of Rome. They believed that the Gods provided direction in everyday life; therefore, the citizens of Rome believed that they did not worship a subjective entity. Instead, they saw their Gods as

objective beings that walked amongst them controlling everyday interactions (Hopkins 1983). Modern historians believe that the *Imperator* represents an incarnation of Jupiter, the master of all Roman Gods, because during the Empire citizens of Rome saw the *Imperator* as the master of all people (Versnel 1970). Creating a "God-like" character such as this was the only way to please the audience.

The *Via Sacra*, or the "sacred way," is a rather small gateway into the central forum of Rome: the *pomerium* (Ramsey 1875). Although it is not a particularly large road, it offers symbolic meaning as the winding pathway lead the triumphal procession throughout the city providing ample time for crowds to gather and witness the spectacle. This was perfect the stage for conquering generals to enter Rome. Citizens of Rome would gather along the pathway to pay homage to the protector of Roman life (Versnel 1970). Gathering crowds would applaud the *Imperator's* dramaturgical teammates (soldiers, Senators, etc...) while simultaneously jeering and taunting those enemies who were now captives of the Roman Empire (Versnel 1970). The role of the historians within the audience was essential to this dramaturgical act as they were not looking to write about common men. These future authors realized that their own place in history depended on captivating present and future audiences and thus as spectators of the Triumph made their own history selective towards those who were seen as uncommon individuals. Only an uncommon individual could achieve such a ceremony which is why those are the characters that dominate Roman history.

A standing army within Rome was very significant, even in the context of a *Truimph*. Laws during the Empire described any military presence within the city walls as a threat to civil society. They enforced these laws by banning any form of weapons in Rome because of the fear of providing tools for a rebellion (Hopkins 1978). Although a true militaristic society in every sense, Romans felt that allowing arms within the walls would make a revolt too simple for

those in opposition with city officials (Polybius 1975). Even the Emperor's *lictors*, or bodyguards, did not carry normal weapons. Instead they were to use *fasces*, which are a tightly bound bundle of rods, to protect the *Imperator*. Some depictions of *fasces*, however, show axes and other solid objects hidden within the bundle of rods in order to be more effective against any invading enemies (Hopkins 1978). More importantly, *fasces* were a symbol of power and protection stemming from the individuals who put them to use in Rome. Having the Senate request a commanding general and his soldiers' presence within Rome represented the trust and respect that the city held for their victorious champion.

In *Roman History*, Appian (2005) provides a first hand description of this symbolic ceremony in his recordings of the Triumph for Publius Cornelius Scipio. This particular Triumph is a celebration of Scipio's victory over the Carthaginians to end the first Punic War. To show all details without manipulation, the accompanying excerpt comes directly from Appian's history. This first-hand account of a *Triumph* gives a true sense of what it is like to be in the crowd witnessing this grand display of military power.

The form of the triumph (which the Romans continue to employ) was as follows: All who were in the procession wore crowns. Trumpeters led the advance and wagons laden with spoils. Towers were borne along representing the captured cities, and pictures showing the exploits of the war; then gold and silver coin and bullion, and whatever else they had captured of that kind; then came the crowns that had been given to the general as a reward for his bravery by cities, by allies, or by the army itself. White oxen came next, and after them elephants and the captive Carthaginian and Numidian chiefs. Lictors clad in purple tunics preceded the general; also a chorus of musicians and pipers, in imitation of an Etruscan procession, wearing belts and golden crowns, and they march evenly with song and dance. They call themselves *Lydi* because, as I think, the Etruscans were a Lydian colony. One of these, in the middle of the procession, wearing a purple cloak and golden bracelets and necklace, caused laughter by making various gesticulations, as though he were insulting the enemy.

Next came a lot of incense bearers, and after them the general himself on a chariot embellished with various designs, wearing a crown of gold and precious stones, and dressed, according to the fashion of the country, in a purple toga embroidered with golden stars. He bore a scepter of ivory, and a laurel branch, which is always the Roman symbol of victory.

Riding in the same chariot with him were boys and girls, and on horses on either side of him young men, his own relatives. Then followed those who had served him in the war as secretaries, aids, and armor-bearers. After these came the army arranged in companies and cohorts, all of them crowned and carrying laurel branches, the bravest of them bearing their

military prizes. They praised some of their captains, derided others, and reproached others; for in a triumph everybody is free, and is allowed to say what he pleases. When [Publius Cornelius] Scipio arrived at the Capitol the procession came to an end, and he entertained his friends at a banquet in the temple. (Appian 2005:9, 66)

Appian (2005) describes many of Goffman's dramaturgical concepts throughout this text. Within the procession, the actor's teammates include the magistrates, senators, relatives, and soldiers who were patrons of Scipio. Historians usually would make note of how many of these individuals were loyal to the *Imperator* as it shows their amount of civic and military influence (Polybius 1975). Other teammates include the incense bearers, musicians, heralds, and *lictors*. The number of *lictors* was also of importance as they were in charge of separating the audience from the *Imperator*. This distance is an example of mystification representing the idea that the *Imperator* is separate from the common civilian. Slaves, captured leaders and soldiers, even children were props rather than actual teammates because they did not willingly, or knowingly, play a role in the ceremony. Goods and animals from foreign lands as well as towers bearing inscriptions were more traditional forms of props and are recognizable as direct material gain from victory. Sacrificial bulls and other religious relics displayed the *Imperator's* faithfulness to the gods. This is an essential part to the ceremony because Roman citizens were very superstitious about religious patronage. Any instance in which an individual did not give proper respect to the Gods had set the city up for tragedy (Livy 1883). Other symbolic elements, such as the costumes worn by the teammates, are marks of possession by the *Imperator*. With these symbolic props in place, the conquering general would make his entrance into Rome on a chariot with four white horses pulling the reins. Wearing a crown of gold covered with an assortment of stones and a purple toga embroidered with golden stars, he yielded both a scepter of ivory and a laurel branch. These are all common symbols of power known throughout the Empire. This costume represented the personal front of the *Imperator* as well as control over all elements of this ceremony (Versnel 1970). Modern historians have

come to believe that there was even a slave riding with the *Imperator* holding the *laurel wreath* above the general's head while whispering, "Remember you are only human," into the *Imperator's* ear (Versnel 1970). There are also references made to the general's face being "red-leaded" signifying him as the Roman deity Jupiter. Visual depictions in either sculptures or inscriptions that still survive today support such detail (Versnel 1970:57).

Using these many visual elements catches the attention of the audience. This ceremony vividly displays the superiority of the *Imperator* through military and political strength and is a way of commanding divine authority over the Empire. As Rome was a patron-client society, those considered teammates participate in the Triumph knowing that they also have something to gain. Some of the slaves may be clients as well; however the nature of the term slave implies a certain degree of forced cooperation. Other props, such as the children and religious symbols show the *Imperator* as someone with whom the audience can relate to. Though the goal of the ceremony is to deify the general, *Imperators* recognize the political importance of appearing as a product of the Roman way of life. This set the stage for future leaders as they see what they can accomplish by promoting the imperialistic nature of war.

Visual remnants of the ancient Empire confirm our knowledge of this ceremony and provide further detail into its meaning. The Arch of Titus stands at the highest point of the *Via Sacra* and is one of the most dominant features leading into the *pomerium*. An inscription on the top of this arch reads, "Senatus Populusque Romanus Divo Tito Divi Vespasiani Filio Vespasiano Augusto." The translation of this inscription is, "The Roman Senate and People to Deified Titus, Vespasian Augustus, son of Deified Vespasian." This arch is a gift to Titus commemorating his conquest of Judea, an enemy of Rome. The reliefs on the inside of the arch depict the procession accompanying his victory. "The Spoils of Jerusalem" relief shows slaves carrying a menorah, heralds carrying signs, and musicians playing trumpets; all of them

wearing their dramaturgical costumes. On the other side, "The Triumph of Titus" relief depicts Titus, wearing the full ceremonial costume, riding in a chariot lead by four horses. Behind Titus in the chariot is *Victory*, also known as the Roman goddess Victoria, holding a crown over the head of Titus signifying the acquisition of the God's respect. Another deity, *Valor*, is holding of the reigns of the four horses pulling Titus's chariot (Sullivan 2005). This illustrates the idea that Titus's Triumph over Judea is the "will of the Gods" as they lead him through the ceremony. The Arch of Titus reminds individuals of Titus's status as a God every time they see it. Today, this arch still stands as a visual reenactment that is available for modern interpretation making it invaluable to our understanding of the spectacle that was the Triumph.

CONCLUSION

The micro-level interaction and manipulation of one's "self" by individuals extends to have macro-scale effects. This ceremony illustrates the *Imperators'* recognition of the sociological imagination as they realize the individual role they play on the world-wide stage. Tacitus's, *The Life of Agricole* (1998), reminds society of those mortal individuals who are lost over time due to the demand for God-like conquerors by writing about a man who did not achieve divine status yet is an uncommon individual by those who love him. Common citizens like Agricole generally remain a figment of imagination in surviving ancient literature. Although archeology provides insight into the lives of the common people, their actions are left to speculation as true accounts of ancient life focus on those who have a dramatic effect on society. Nothing represents this better than the Triumph and the history surrounding it. Dramatic historical documentation along with visual images of a society seeking to connect themselves to the divine dominates the knowledge of Roman civilization. Thus, the literary rise and fall of the Roman Empire is the remains of characters engaging in an act hoping to

manufacture a legacy worthy of documentation. This is the script for the Roman Triumph and the cause of over-expansion leading to the fall of the Empire.

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