

NEH Application Cover Sheet (FEL-262324)

Fellowships

PROJECT DIRECTOR

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APPLICATION INFORMATION

Title: *The Politics of Knowledge in Late Republican Rome*

Grant period: From 2019-07-01 to 2020-06-30

Project field(s): Classics; Intellectual History; Classical Literature

Description of project: My project is a work of intellectual history focusing on the last decades of the Roman Republic (50s/40s BCE). This was a period of both intense intellectual flourishing and extreme political unrest--and, curiously, the agents of both were often the same people. Members of the senatorial class who contributed to the development of Roman scholarship and philosophy were instrumental in the events that brought down the Republic, ending up in opposing camps during the civil war. I treat the intellectual and political activities of these individuals as two sides of the same coin, exploring how scholarship and statesmanship inform one another. My aim is to capture the complexity of this pivotal period by illustrating how the remarkable "republic of letters" of first-century Rome is involved with the fight over the actual *res publica*, and how in this period the organization of knowledge is always bound up with the question of what it means to be Roman in a time of crisis.

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Katharina Volk: Narrative

Summary

I am requesting NEH support for the completion of a scholarly monograph, provisionally titled *The Politics of Knowledge in Late Republican Rome*. In this work, I examine the last decades of the Roman Republic (50s and 40s BCE) with a view to integrating intellectual, social, and political history. It is a curious fact that the mid-first century BCE was a period of both intense intellectual flourishing and extreme political unrest—and what is even more remarkable is that the agents of both were very often the same people. Such members of the senatorial class as Cicero, Caesar, Brutus, Cato, and Varro, among others, contributed greatly to the development of Roman scholarship (in philosophy, science, religion, grammar, and historical and antiquarian studies) and engaged in a lively and often polemical exchange with one another. The very same men were crucially involved in the tumultuous events that brought about the collapse of the Republic, ending up on opposing sides of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey in the early 40s.

In my book, I treat the intellectual and political activities of these "senator scholars" as two sides of the same coin, exploring how scholarship and statesmanship mutually inform one another. My aim is to capture the true complexity of this pivotal period by illustrating how the remarkable "republic of letters" of first-century Rome is involved with the fight over the actual *res publica*, and how in this period the acquisition, organization, and diffusion of knowledge is always bound up with the question of what it means to be Roman in a time of crisis. Topics to consider include the uses of philosophy, from Cicero's project of creating a Roman philosophical encyclopedia to Cato's ostentatious Stoicism to the Epicurean quietism advocated by the poet Lucretius; the construction of an idealized Roman past in Cicero and Varro; the debates over the shape of the Latin language, as seen most prominently in the controversy over Caesar's *De analogia*; the politicization of cosmology and science, from Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* to Caesar's calendar reform; and the propagandistic and polemical uses of old and new forms of divination, including the rise of astrology.

The late Republic is one of the best-documented and consequently best-studied periods of ancient history, and its literary products are among the texts most beloved by Latinists. Until now, however, scholars have typically examined the different aspects of the era in isolation: Cicero, for example, is discussed as either a statesman or a writer of philosophy, and historians concerned with Caesar's military and political exploits by and large leave his grammatical theories to experts on ancient linguistic thought. In addition, there is still a tendency to regard Roman intellectual efforts as second rate in comparison with those of the Greeks, and historians of philosophy in particular tend to give Roman thinkers short shrift. There are signs that the tide is turning: recent years have seen a number of publications that take Roman philosophy seriously as both Roman and philosophy (e.g., Williams and Volk 2016; Müller and Mariani Zini 2018) and that read Cicero's philosophical writings in particular as closely connected to his political concerns (e.g., Gildenhard 2007; Baraz 2012; Woolf 2015). My own work is part of this scholarly movement, and in offering an integrated view of the intellectual, social, and political practices of the late Republican Roman elite, my monograph does something that has never been attempted before. It is my hope that the book will make a significant contribution to our understanding of Roman culture of the mid-first century BCE, and that it will open new avenues to the study of the intellectual history of the Greco-Roman world as a whole. My envisaged readership encompasses classicists, ancient historians, historians of philosophy, and intellectual historians.

Structure

The book consists of six chapters, followed by a short conclusion. In Chapter 1 ("Introduction"), I position my work in relation to previous scholarship on late Republican intellectual history, most notably the contributions of Elizabeth Rawson, Claudia Moatti, and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, and discuss my own methodology. My aim is not to describe all scholarly activity of the mid-first century (as Rawson so

admirably did) nor to provide a master narrative, let alone posit an aetiology for posited developments (such as Moatti's "rationalization" or Wallace-Hadrill's "cultural revolution"). Instead, I propose a synchronic study of a particular set of members of the Roman ruling class and their activities, employing methods of the sociology of knowledge, as championed, among others, by Peter Burke. Within the social history of knowledge, the late Republic presents a particularly interesting case in that the figures I study are not part of a separate class of "intellectuals" or "scholars" (designations from which they would have shrunk), but politically active members of the upper class, whose learning and literary production (activities typically vaguely referred to as *studia*, "pursuits, studies") are part and parcel of their aristocratic lifestyle. My focus throughout the book is on the ways in which these men's studies relate to their public lives at the very moment when the social and political system to which they owe their status begins to fall apart.

Chapter 2 ("*Res publica* of Letters") provides an overview of the intellectual practices of educated Romans in the mid-first century BCE and of the ways in which they themselves perceived and talked about them. Using especially the invaluable source of Cicero's correspondence, I discuss both the vocabulary used to refer to elite Roman *studia* and the various learned activities my protagonists engaged in, including reading, writing, conversing, and corresponding as well as the acquisition, collection, and circulation of books. What is remarkable is the pronounced sociability of many of these practices: in the course of their studies, Roman senators habitually interacted with individuals from diverse backgrounds, ranging from slaves to Greek intellectuals to other members of the upper classes. Among likeminded peers, mutual intellectual interests and interactions (sometimes referred to as *societas studiorum*) could be evoked in a variety of contexts as one of the social bonds that held the aristocratic society of the late Republic together.

The next two chapters treat the various uses of philosophy in the social and political life of the late Republic. From the mid-second century BCE, the Romans had been exposed to Greek philosophical teaching, and a hundred years later, educated upperclass men could be expected to be familiar with the basic doctrines of major schools. Greek philosophers taught at Rome, frequently living in the houses of Roman patrons, while Romans studied with Greek teachers in Athens and other centers of learning, and often formed allegiances to particular schools, identifying themselves as Stoics, Epicureans, Antiocheans, or Academic Skeptics. After earlier beginnings, philosophical writing in Latin began to reach a steady volume in the mid-50s, with Lucretius' poem *De rerum natura* and Cicero's *De re publica*. Offering not only intellectual models for comprehending the structure of reality, but also various versions of an "art of life" that promised wisdom, virtue, and happiness to its practitioners, philosophy presented an attractive set of potential responses to a social class in the grip of a deepening political crisis.

Chapter 3 ("Engaged Philosophy") focuses on the period leading up to the civil war, considering three diverse cases of interconnection between philosophical affiliation and political attitude: the Stoicism of Cato the Younger and its influence on his unorthodox and inflexible political *modus operandi*; the political philosophy of the Academic Skeptic Cicero and the ways in which it informed, and was informed by, the author's own political stance and decisions; and the period's most popular philosophical school, Epicureanism, which was embraced by many politically active Romans despite the fact that Epicurus explicitly counsels against political engagement. Chapter 4 ("Philosophy after Pharsalus") in turn considers the uses of philosophy during and immediately after Caesar's dictatorship. These include the turn to philosophical consolation on the part of such defeated Pompeians as Cicero, Brutus, and many of their correspondents; the pursuit of philosophy as politics by other means in Cicero's great philosophical corpus of the 40s; and the philosophical arguments employed by both the assassins of Julius Caesar and their detractors. I conclude that the political turmoil of the mid-first century was itself an important catalyst in the development of Roman philosophy, as Romans used the Greek learning they had acquired in their attempts to make sense of and master the political and spiritual crisis of their society.

Chapter 5 ("The Invention of Rome") turns away from philosophy and considers various constructions of Roman identity found in contemporary antiquarian and linguistic writings. Varro plays a major role in this discussion: the Roman polymath was famously credited by Cicero with having made the Romans feel at home at in their own city, where they had previously been but strangers (*Academica*

posteriora 9), and his works on the Latin language and on human and divine "antiquities" were explicitly intended to make his fellow citizens capable actors in their own society by offering them a reconstruction of their past. Other topics include the debate over Latinity (the proper employment of the Latin language)—as seen in Cicero's *De oratore* and *Brutus*, Caesar's *De analogia*, and Varro's *De lingua Latina*—and the creation of a canonical narrative of Latin literary history. My goal throughout the chapter is to assess the ways in which the competing scholarly versions of Roman past and present relate to the anxieties of the Republican ruling class at a moment of fundamental societal and political changes.

Chapter 6 ("Coopting the Cosmos") leaves behind the historical and civic to treat the interrelated fields of science and religion, focusing on late Republican models of the cosmos and (Roman) man's place in it. I discuss both the theory and practice of divination, including philosophical debates about the validity of prophecy, the perceived crisis of the traditional Roman practice of augury, and the rise of new methods of prediction-making, most notably astrology. In addition to Cicero's treatment in *De diuinatione*, I consider various instances of the political use of astrology, including by Cicero's fellow senator Nigidius Figulus, a fascinating figure labeled *Pythagoricus et magus* by Jerome (*Chronicle* 156.26 Helm). Other topics include the development of ideas of human immortality or even apotheosis—as seen, among other places, in Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* and the propagandistic approximation of Caesar to a divinity—and the ideological implications of Caesar's calendar reform. I hope to show that these various attempts to "coopt the cosmos" can be read as part of a tangle of conflicts among the members of the aristocracy—conflicts that played out not only in senatorial debate and on the battle field, but also in scholarly disputes and on the pages of books.

A brief conclusion summarizes the book's results.

Preparation and schedule

A widely trained classicist with a specialization and extensive publication record in Latin literature and Roman culture, I am well prepared to undertake this project. While much of my previous work has focused on poetry, I have always been interested in intellectual history and especially the history of philosophy at Rome. My publications on didactic poetry have often examined poets with a strong philosophical bent (Lucretius, Manilius, Aratus), and in recent years my scholarly work, teaching, and other academic activities have to a large part revolved around Roman philosophy, ancient scholarship, and the intellectual world of the late Republic (see, e.g., my articles on Varro, as well as Williams and Volk 2016, an edited volume based on a conference I organized together with my colleague Gareth Williams). These topics are currently receiving renewed interest among scholars of the ancient world, and I view my work as both being part of this movement and promising to advance it.

I have been working on the book for several years and was able to make significant progress in 2016-17 while holding a Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. So far I have written drafts of the Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4. I have begun work on Chapter 5 and expect that I will have a completed draft of this chapter by the beginning of my projected term of NEH support in July 2019 (I would love to get further than that, but given my teaching and administrative duties at Columbia University over the next fifteen months, as well as the fact that I have committed to a number of unrelated publications and conference papers, I am not optimistic). If awarded the fellowship, I would then spend the academic year 2019-20 on leave (most likely in New York City, using the academic resources of my home institution), drafting Chapter 6 and then revising the entire manuscript. I hope to be able to submit the book to the publisher (b) (4)

by the end of the summer of 2020.

Katharina Volk: Bibliography

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Katharina Volk: Curriculum vitae

Education

Ph.D. in Classics, Princeton University, 1999 (Dissertation: "*Carmen et res*: The Poetics of Latin Didactic [Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid]"; adviser: E. Fantham)
M.A. in Classics, Princeton University, 1996
M.A. in Lateinischer Philologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 1994
Visiting Student, University of Oxford, 1991-92

Employment

Department of Classics, Columbia University: Professor (2011-), Associate Professor (2006-11),
Assistant Professor (2002-6)
Department of Classics, Bucknell University: Assistant Professor (2000-2)
Department of Classics, Princeton University: Lecturer (1999-2000)

Fellowships and Awards (selection)

Heyman Center Fellowship, Columbia University (2018-19)
Fellowship, Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (2016-17)
Columbia University/Michael I. Sovern Affiliated Fellowship, American Academy in Rome (2015-16)
Distinguished Columbia Faculty Award (2010-11)
Lionel Trilling Book Award (for *Manilius and his Intellectual Background*), Columbia University (2010)
Loeb Classical Library Foundation Grant (2005-6)

Publications (monographs, edited volumes, and selected articles only)

"Varro and the Disorder of Things." *HSCP* 110 (in press).
"A Wise Man in an Old Country: Varro, *Antiquitates rerum diuinarum* and [Plato], *Letter 5*." *RhM* 159 (2016), 429-433.
"Signs, Seers and Senators: Divinatory Expertise in Cicero and Nigidius Figulus." In *Authority and Expertise in Ancient Scientific Culture*, ed. by J. König and G. Woolf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 329-347.
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- (with Rolando Ferri and J. Mira Seo) *Callida Musa: Papers on Latin Literature in Honor of R. Elaine Fantham* (= *MD* 61). Pisa: Serra, 2009.
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Languages

Ancient Greek, English, French, German, Italian, Latin.

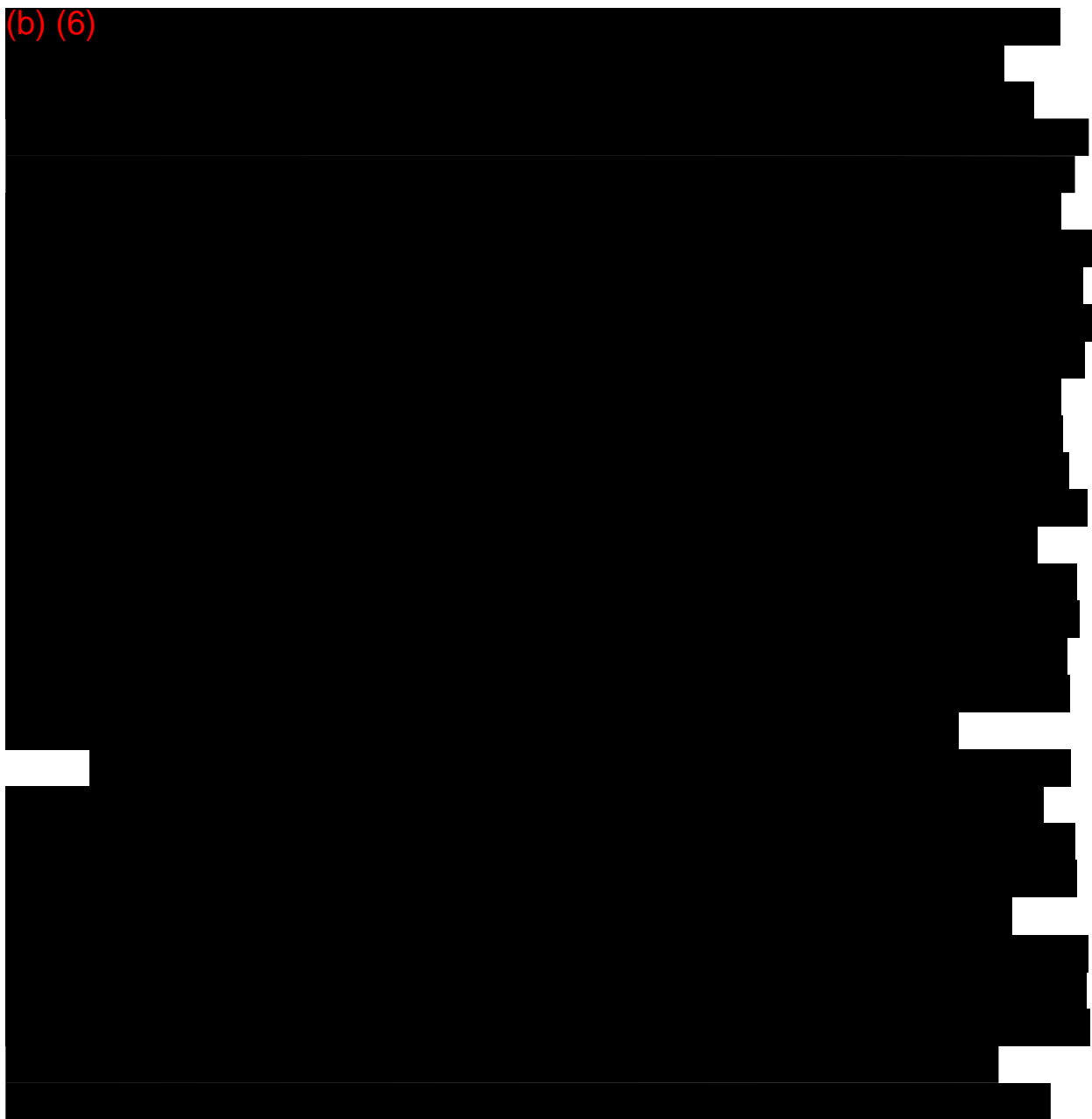
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Sincerely,

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