

Pathways to Power: The Importance of Political Influence in Republican Women's Social Networks

Although the display of wealth was an important component in the social competition between Rome's Republican *matronae*, it did not convey the same social authority as political influence. In the year 195 BCE, Aemilia, the wife of Scipio Africanus, was one of the richest women in Roman society and took pains to display her great wealth publically (Polybius 31.26). Her personal authority within Rome's female social network allowed her to influence the repeal of the Lex Oppia (Scullard 1970, 1973, Culham 1982). She organized massive female protests in favor of the repeal that lasted two days and swayed the votes of the tribunes (Livy 34.1-8).

The scale of the protests proves that Aemilia had a great deal of influence among Rome's matrons, but her authority was not the result of high social position or wealth. Twenty-six years later, during Aemilia's lifetime, the senate passed the *Lex Voconia de Mulierum Hereditatibus*. This law, also the brainchild of Cato the Elder, limited the amount that women could inherit and made it impossible for a wealthy woman to pass her wealth on to her daughters. If Aemilia still have the same authority that she wielded in 195, the *Lex Voconia* would not have passed without some kind of public opposition. However, the law was adopted without any protest on the part of Rome's female population (Gai. Inst. 226, Liv. 41.28. 6-10).

In the 26 years since the *Lex Oppia* protests, Aemilia's wealth and social capital had not diminished, but she had lost her political authority. The only major change in her circumstances that could account for that diminution was the death of her powerful husband and both of her sons. Without a male family member to act as her agent within the Roman government, Aemilia no longer had the political capital to organize Rome's matrons effectively. Thus a matron's authority among her female peers was dependent on her ability to effectively deliver real

political decision-making authority through her male family members, not on her financial resources.

Aemilia's younger daughter, Cornelia, learned that lesson well. Through her two sons, the Gracchi brothers, she was able to become a major political force during the later half of the second century (Plutarch *CG* 4.2; *Inst. Orat.* 1.1.6). The importance of powerful male relations to authority with the purely feminine sphere sets the famous story of Cornelia's sons as her treasures in a new light. The episode has long been treated as an exemplar of motherly virtue, but it can instead be read as a cryptic reference to the different types of authority open to women. Roman women could gain some authority through their wealth, as patroness, but that authority is ultimately limited to the realm of personal gratitude, especially after the passage of the *Lex Voconia*.

Cornelia's apocryphal gesture to her sons as more valuable than her material goods indicates an acknowledgement that a woman could gain greater authority through her familial relationships to politically dominant men than through her own financial power. It was not a gesture of maternal pride, but political ambition.

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