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The censors as guardians of public and family life in the Roman Republic

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Preview

Anna Tarwacka's volume offers a significant reassessment of the role of the censors in the Roman *res publica*. Moving beyond the traditional view of the censorship as a largely technical magistracy concerned with the *census* and fiscal administration, the author situates it within a broader framework of moral governance. From this perspective, the censorship emerges as a key institution through which the interdependence of law, morality, and social order may be examined. In the Roman context, the censors acted as guarantors of civic equilibrium, exercising an *auctoritas* capable of shaping citizens' status, reputation, and public identity. Tarwacka traces the evolution of the magistracy from its early administrative functions to its later and more prominent role in supervising morality in accordance with the *mos maiorum*, understood as the foundation of Roman social identity and political stability. The expansion of censorial authority across both public and private spheres, and its implications for the development of Roman law, constitute the central focus of the study, with particular emphasis on the *nota censoria* as an instrument of normative regulation.

The book is structured in five chapters, preceded by an Introduction and followed by a Conclusion.

Chapter 1, "The Origins and Nature of the Censorship," examines the emergence of censorship and its position within the Republican constitutional system. It traces the origins of the magistracy to the fifth century BC, considers the gradual expansion of its competences, and highlights the non-coercive yet socially far-reaching nature of the powers entrusted to it. The chapter offers a detailed discussion of the principal censorial functions. Central among these is the *census*, which was far more than a simple accounting exercise: it constituted a fundamental moment in the formation of civic identity. Through the registration of citizens, their classification according to wealth, and their assignment to tribes, the censors played an active role in shaping the political and social order of the Republic. Tarwacka draws attention to an institutional paradox: although this magistracy lacked coercive powers in a strict sense, it nonetheless possessed a capacity for sanction operating at the symbolic and social level. This proved to be an exceptionally effective instrument for maintaining political balance. The opening chapter successfully establishes the conceptual framework for the volume as a whole and demonstrates the author's ability to bring legal questions into productive dialogue with issues of politics and morality.

The second chapter, "Census-Related Powers of the Censors," offers a systematic analysis of the powers exercised by the censors in connection with the *census*, demonstrating that these extended far beyond a merely administrative function. Tarwacka argues that the *census* constituted a central instrument in the construction of the Roman social order, through which the censors exerted a profound influence on the civic, political, and symbolic life of the community. The

chapter opens with an important conceptual clarification: the *census* should not be understood as a purely quantitative registration of persons and property, but rather as a performative institutional act capable of defining a citizen's status within the *res publica*. Through the declaration of property (*professio*), citizens publicly located themselves within a hierarchy that was both recognized and legitimized by the state. A key focus of the analysis is the relationship between the *census* and the *regimen morum* ("review of morals"), which reveals that, in Republican Rome, the distinction between administrative and moral spheres was largely artificial. At the same time, the chapter treats the Republican *census* in a relatively uniform and timeless manner, despite the fact that certain competences and practices changed significantly over time: a clearer differentiation between the various phases of the Republic would have strengthened the analysis. Moreover, although the non-absolute nature of censorial power is acknowledged, less attention is devoted to strategies of adaptation, evasion, or resistance on the part of citizens, which might have offered a more dynamic picture of the functioning of the institution.

Chapter Three, "The Principles of the Regimen Morum," constitutes the conceptual core of the volume, clarifying the nature of the *regimen morum* and the principles according to which it operated. The chapter begins with a negative definition: the *regimen morum* did not issue verdicts, nor did it impose codified penalties, yet it nonetheless had real and lasting effects on the social and political standing of citizens. Tarwacka therefore identifies the *regimen morum* as a form of informal normative power, grounded in custom, shared values, and the *auctoritas* of the censors. Operating without a defined normative corpus, the *regimen morum* relied on the *mos maiorum*, censorial precedents, and a body of widely shared social expectations. Tarwacka stresses that this indeterminacy did not amount to arbitrariness but rather represented a specific mode of social regulation characteristic of Roman political culture. Particular attention is devoted to the public and performative dimension of censorial decisions. The censorial *notae* did not just affect the individual but conveyed a normative message to the community as a whole, reinforcing models of behavior deemed appropriate. In this sense, the *regimen morum* is interpreted as an instrument for constructing and maintaining the collective moral order. The censors emerge not as mere custodians of immutable values, but as authorized interpreters of tradition, required to mediate between continuity and change and the *mos maiorum* itself becomes a dynamic normative system, described as a "living social norm", continually reaffirmed and renegotiated through censorial action, a space of mediation between past and present, ideal values and concrete behavior. In seeking to present the *regimen morum* as an expression of shared values, however, Tarwacka at times tends to downplay the social and political conflict that could accompany censorial interventions, particularly during periods of acute internal tension within the Republic.

In Chapter Four, "Censorial Mark Concerning Morality in Family Life," the author focuses on censorial *notae* applied to behavior relating to family life, demonstrating that the family constituted a central sphere of intervention for the *regimen morum*. The underlying assumption is that the Roman family was not regarded as an autonomous private sphere, but as a political and moral nucleus essential to the stability of the *res publica*. Tarwacka shows that *notae* in the familial sphere did not punish legal transgressions but rather behavior perceived as incompatible with Roman ideals of self-control (*moderatio*), dignity (*gravitas*), and social continuity. A key element of the chapter is the idea that the censorial *nota* fulfilled an exemplary and communicative function: by (publicly) targeting an individual, the censors addressed the community as a whole, reaffirming shared normative models.

A particularly significant example is provided by censorial interventions against citizens who refused marriage or procreation. Emblematic is the speech of the censor Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus in 131 BC, preserved by Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 1.6.2–3), in which the obligation to marry is presented as a civic duty necessary for the survival of the state. In this context, even in the absence of a legal violation, private conduct acquired political relevance insofar as it was perceived to threaten the continuity of the *res publica*. The censorial *nota* thus did not punish an offence, but it publicly redefined a citizen's moral adequacy. This is a convincing demonstration of Tarwacka's argument that the Roman family constituted an intrinsically political space. Less persuasive, however, is the interpretation of episodes relating to sexual or domestic behavior deemed improper, such as *notae* imposed for adultery or for a lack of

gravitas in the role of *pater familias*, cases transmitted primarily by authors such as Livy and Valerius Maximus. In these instances, Tarwacka tends to read censorial intervention as an expression of widely shared principles, whereas the selective and rhetorical nature of the sources makes it difficult to determine whether such actions represented ordinary practice or exceptional cases elevated to normative exempla. A tension thus emerges between the theoretical coherence of the *regimen morum* as a system of social control and the difficulty of demonstrating its systematic application in everyday Republican life.

In the final chapter, "Censorial Mark Concerning Public Functions and Way of Life," Tarwacka analyses censorial *notae* applied to conduct connected with the exercise of public office and with citizens' lifestyles. The chapter shows that in Republican Rome there was no clear separation between political role and personal behavior. The argument is particularly convincing when the author examines cases in which censors intervened against members of the elite for conduct deemed morally unworthy of their office. An example is the expulsion of Lucius Quinctius Flamininus from the Senate in 184 BC (Livy 39.42.5–6), motivated not by a legal offence but by behavior perceived as incompatible with the dignity of public office. In such cases, the censorial *nota* clearly appears as a sanction of status, intended to preserve the moral credibility of the ruling aristocracy and to reaffirm the principle that political authority should rest on *gravitas* and self-restraint. Equally effective is the analysis of interventions against excessively luxurious lifestyles, in which censors targeted not a single act, but a *modus vivendi* regarded as incompatible with the traditional aristocratic ideal. Less persuasive, however, is the tendency to interpret these interventions primarily as coherent applications of shared values, since cases such as that of Flamininus can also be read in the light of political rivalries, which the chapter tends to leave in the background. Furthermore, the almost exclusive focus on senators and magistrates makes it difficult to assess how systematic censorial control over lifestyle truly was, and to what extent it was concentrated on emblematic episodes elevated to normative models by the sources. Overall, the chapter effectively shows how the censorship functioned as a mechanism of moral selection within the political elite, while leaving open the question of the boundary between ordinary practice and ideological construction.

The conclusions reached by Tarwacka are compelling. The censors of the Roman Republic emerge as guardians of public and family life, exercising a form of power grounded not in legal coercion, but in *auctoritas* and in the capacity to define shared social norms. The censorship thus appears as a magistracy of social regulation, capable of linking the private and public spheres without recourse to written law. The censorial *nota* represents the emblematic instrument of this function: a sanction of status that affected reputation and redefined the individual's civic role. A central point of the conclusion is the emphasis on the non-arbitrary character of censorial power. Drawing on examples discussed in the preceding chapters, such as interventions in family conduct or in cases of unworthiness in public office, Tarwacka reiterates that the censors operated within a horizon of shared values anchored in the *mos maiorum* and continually negotiated within the political community.

Overall, Tarwacka's volume stands out for its methodological rigor, clarity of argument, and ability to integrate institutional history with social history. There are some limitations, particularly its tendency to downplay the role of conflict and its interpretative caution in relation to crisis situations. There is also the tendency to present the censorship as a largely homogeneous institution over the long term. This risks smoothing over differences between the various phases of the Republic, especially between the middle and late Republican periods, when the balance between moral authority and social consensus was more fragile. Yet these limitations do not undermine the solidity of the overall framework. *The Censors as Guardians of Public and Family Life in the Roman Republic* thus represents a significant contribution to the study of Republican institutions, offering a reading of censorship as a sophisticated instrument of moral governance and as a key to understanding Roman modes of constructing political and social order. It has the particular merit of showing Roman society as a dynamic normative system, continually reaffirmed and renegotiated through the actions of the censors, who emerge as authorized interpreters of reality, translating it into tradition rather than merely executing it.