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VELLEIUS PATERCULUS AND THE ROMAN SENATE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PRINCIPATE¹

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Abstract: The "Roman history" by Velleius Paterculus is the sole historiographical work written by a contemporary of Augustus and Tiberius. The paper deals with representation of the Roman Senate of Velleius' time in his work. I argue that in his compendium the historian reflected the ambivalent position of the Senate under the first two Roman Emperors. He depicts the institution as more passive in comparison with its description in the previous period and as depending on the Princeps. At the same time this Roman author characterizes the Senate as having *maiestas*, the notion which was not connected with this authority under the Republic. Assigning of *maiestas* to the Senate by Velleius reflects a deep change in the position of the curia due to decline of the popular assemblies' significance at the beginning of the Principate.

Key words: Velleius Paterculus, Roman Senate, Augustus, Tiberius, Principate, Roman historiography, Latin literature, majestas

Historia Romana by Velleius Paterculus is the single surviving historiographical work written by a contemporary of the Emperors Augustus and Tiberius. It also includes the description of the reigns of these two rulers. Scholars have been studying Velleius' work quite closely². Modern studies pay much attention to such themes as representation of historical personalities in *Historia Romana*³, references to particular topics in it and its author's views⁴, and the compendium is also considered as a cultural phenomenon⁵.



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² Bibliography of studies devoted to Velleius Paterculus see: Hellegouarc'h 1984, 404–436; Albrecht 2012, 906–907

³ Schmitzer 1999, Valentini 2008, Pitcher 2011, Seager 2011, Welsh 2011, Fasolini, 2015

⁴ Saddington 2003, Russo 2008, Wiseman 2011, Robert 2013, Kovács 2017

⁵ Lobur 2007, 2011

One of the overlooked subjects, however, is Velleius' representation of the Roman Senate of his time in the work. To the best of my knowledge, there are no specific studies dedicated to this problem. Nevertheless, some scholars expressed their views on this topic. So, Schmitzer wrote in his paper "Roman Values in Velleius" published in 2011, "that Velleius juxtaposes the Senate with *maiestas* in two such prominent passages could be seen as complementary to the development just mentioned in relation to *auctoritas*. The Senate has lost its real opportunities to act, it is primarily just a venerable institution, which while it enjoys high regard, with almost religious overtones, is no longer active in practical politics – this at least is how Velleius sees it, and in this he is not completely wrong"⁶. Recently, this notion was accepted by Hodgson⁷.

In my paper, I am going to examine representation of the Roman Senate contemporary to Velleius in his *Historia Romana*. As Paterculus was Augustus' younger contemporary, I am going to analyze the text describing not only Tiberius' rule, but Augustus' rule, as well.

The description of the rule of the first two Roman Emperors spans across articles 89 to 130 of the *Historia*'s second book. In the course of this narrative, the Roman author mentions the Senate sixteen times (II 89,3.4; 90, 3; 91,1; 103, 3; 111,1; 115,3; 121, 1; 124, 1.2; 125, 2; 126,2; 128.1; 128,4; 129,3), the senator as an impersonal designation of the curia's representative – three times (II 91, 3; 111, 3; 129, 2), and senators as a group in general – thrice (II 111, 1.3; 129, 3).

By comparison, describing the republican period, Velleius mentions the Senate 38 times (Vell. I. 9,3; 10,6; 12,2; 14,1; II 3,1; 3,2; 6,3; 13,2; 13,3; 15,4; 20,3; 30,3; 32,3; 34,3; 35,1; 35,4; 38,5; 45,3, 45,5, 49,2; 49,4; 50,2; 58,3; 61,1; 61,2; 61,3; 62,1; 62,5; 63,3; 64,3; 68,1; 68,2; 73,2; 83,3). It is important to remember that 80% of the first book was lost and that a part of the Roman history from Romulus to the Third Macedonian war is missing⁸. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that the frequency, at which the Senate was mentioned in the description of the republican era, would have been even greater. In his narrative of Imperial times Velleius concerns exclusively with the person of the Princeps, at first with Augustus, then with Tiberius⁹. It is reasonable to suggest that the smaller number of mentions of the Senate in the section devoted to Principate is due to this fact.

⁶ Schmitzer 2011, 191.

⁷ Hodgson 2017, 270.

⁸ Sumner 1970, 281.

⁹ McGonagle 1970, 144; Tiberius dominates even during narrative nominally devoted to Augustan reign. According to Woodman, concentration of Tiberius in paragraphs 94–123 is due to their military subject matter. So, it is more reflection of reality, than an endeavor at writing a biography of the second Emperor (Woodman 1977, 54).

To designate the Senate and the senators of the imperial era, Velleius almost always uses the words *senatus* and *senator* accordingly. There is only one instance when he uses a different word to describe the Senate as *curia*, the place where the Senate held sessions; in that case he employed metonymy (II 126,2). He does that not only to avoid repetition of the same word *senatus* in two consecutive sentences but also for rhetorical purposes. That sentence mentions along with the Senate various other types of popular assemblies; all government institutions are named by their location¹⁰.

Velleius gives direct descriptions of the Senate's status under Augustus and Tiberius in his description of the reigns of these two Emperors only twice.

The first time Velleius does that is in a passage that opens the account of the Augustan Principate. First, the author writes that the Romans are celebrating the end of the civil war and Octavian's return back to Rome, after which he gives a general review of the Principate. It is in this part of the passage that Paterculus mentions the restitution of the Senate's *majestas*. The author describes the whole reign of Augustus as the time of "restitution"¹¹.

finita vicesimo anno bella civilia, sepulta externa; revocata pax, sopitus ubique armorum furor; restituta vis legibus, iudiciis auctoritas, senatui maiestas (Vell. II 89,3)

Another passage, which delineates the Tiberius' Principate, is written in the same style¹². In that excerpt, Velleius yet again provides a direct assessment of the Senate's position in the Empire.

Revocata in forum fides; summota e foro seditio, ambitio campo, discordia curia, sepultaeque ac situ obsitae iustitia aequitas industria civitati redditae; accessit magistratibus auctoritas, senatui maiestas; iudiciis gravitas (Vell. II 126, 2).

In both cases the Senate is being ascribed *maiestas*. The fact that the author used *maiestas* with regard to the Senate twice suggests the word is there on purpose¹³. We can adduce the following argument in favor of this point of view. Besides the Senate, in the mentioned passages, the restoration of the prestige of the courts is also reported twice. In one case, the word *auctoritas* is used to describe this (Vell. II 89, 3), and in the other *gravitas* is used (Vell. II 126, 2). In other words, there is no consistency of word usage with regard to the courts, while the same word is used for the Senate.



¹⁰ Woodman 1977, 237.

¹¹ Woodman 1983, 250.

¹² Woodman 1983, 250.

¹³ Hodgson 2017, 270.

The rhetoric of restituting the Senate's prestige is characteristic of the panegyrics of the Empire era. Velleius is the first author to use it¹⁴. This motif is also present in Pliny the Younger's "Panegyricus"¹⁵. The author of Maximus and Balbinus' biography writes about the restitution of the Senate's *dignitas*¹⁶. An unknown orator writes about the restitution of *auctoritas* in his panegyric for Constantinus Augustus¹⁷. In contrast to the given examples, Velleius uses the word *maiestas*. Before we turn to analysis of the mentioned Velleius's passages it is instructive to give some information of the term *maiestas* and its usage with regard to the Senate.

By word *maiestas*, the Romans described various subjects, distinguished by their position and power¹⁸. The term is difficult to define¹⁹. Drexler, who studied the question, came to the conclusion that *maiestas* is a force, but achieved not by some external means, but only by the power of an impression that no one can avoid when meeting with it. It awakens and causes fear, worship, submission, it binds and obliges; it is something moral and has a religious meaning²⁰.

It is necessary to distinguish *auctoritas* from *maiestas*, at least as it refers to the period of the Republic. At this time, *auctoritas* was not included in the concept of *maiestas*. If the first concept was static, the second one, on the contrary, was dynamic. The Romans believed that *maiestas* was a more significant category in comparison with *auctoritas*. It characterizes the superiority of the Roman people over the *auctoritas* of the Senate. Originally, it had a religious meaning. First of all, *maiestas* belongs to the gods, it is integral to their essence. Remembering their divine origin, the Roman people believed that they also had "greatness". The Romans believed that the *maiestas* of their people is the "greatness" of the first people on earth. There was no difference in the rank of *maiestas* of the Romans and gods²¹.

According to Roman notions, at least in the 1st century BC, *maiestas* was considered a typical sign of the Roman people. In the republican era, the "greatness"

¹⁷ Lat. Pan. XII 20,1: Quibus senatui auctoritatem pristinam reddidisti.

¹⁴ Ramage 1982, 269; Woodman 1977, 240.

¹⁵ Plin. *Pan.* 66. In more detail about the places of Velleius' text and of Pliny's Panegyric that have a similar meaning, see: Mesk 1911, 85–86.

¹⁶ Vit. *Max. Balb.* 17, 2: gratulatus senatui, cuius pro iudicio, quod in vos habuit, reddistis pristinam dignitatem.

¹⁸ Kübler 1928, 542; Drexler 1956, 196.

¹⁹ Salvo 2013, 4236. According to Kübler (Kübler 1928, 542) the concept cannot be defined at all.

²⁰ Drexler 1956, 205–206.

²¹ Gundel 1963, 300–301; Salvo 2013, 4236; Hellegouarch 1972, 320; Drexler 1956, 196.

belonged primarily to the Romans and their state form. In addition, magistrates possessed "greatness" as representatives of the Roman people²².

The Romans of the time of the Republic did not characterize the Senate as having $maiestas^{23}$. In that era another word was used to describe the power position of the Curia and its special role in the Roman political system – $auctoritas^{24}$. It was also often used by the Romans to describe the decisions of the Senate, in other words, frequently served as a synonym for *senatus consultum*²⁵. The term *auctoritas senatus* was an expression of the prestige and influence of the Senate and its power²⁶.

The Romans' idea about the inhesion of *auctoritas* to the Senate was expressed most successfully by Cicero. In his treatise *On the Laws* he wrote, "auctoritas in senatu sit" (Cic. *Leg.* 3,28). In another treatise he wrote, "auctoritas in principum consilio et libertatis in populo sit" (Cic. *Rep.* 2, 57)²⁷. There is only one known instance from the mid-1st century BC in which the Senate and the Roman people were *both* characterized as possessing it (Cic. *Sest.* 12.: senatum populumque Romanum sine militum praesidio tueri facile maiestate sua)²⁸.

The situation has changed with the oncoming of the Imperial period. It is not uncommon for Roman authors of that era to ascribe *maiestas* to the Senate. Among them are Livy, Valerius Maximus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Florus, author of "Life of Probus", and Claudian. This quality is ascribed to the Senate both in the description of the Republican period, as well as the authors' own contemporary time ²⁹.

²⁹ Liv. IV 2,4: Reminiscerentur quam maiestatem senatus ipsi a patribus accepissent; Val. Max. I 8,1: Item bello Macedonico P. Vatinius Reatinae praefecturae uir noctu urbem petens existimauit duos iuuenes excellentis formae albis equis residentes obuios sibi factos nuntiare die, qui praeterierat, Persen regem a Paulo captum. quod cum senatui indicasset, tamquam maiestatis eius et amplitudinis uano sermone contemptor in carcerem coniectus, postquam Pauli litteris illo die Persen captum apparuit, et custodia liberatus et insuper agro ac uacatione donatus est; IX 5,1: Atque ut superbia quoque et inpotentia in conspicuo ponatur, M. Fuluius Flaccus consul M. Plautii Hypsaei collega, cum perniciosissimas rei publicae leges introduceret de ciuitate <Italiae> danda et de prouocatione ad populum eorum, qui ciuitatem mutare noluissent, aegre conpulsus est ut in curiam ueniret: deinde partim monenti, partim oranti senatui ut incepto desisteret, responsum non dedit. tyrannici spiritus consul haberetur, si aduersus unum senatorem hoc modo se gessisset, quo Flaccus in totius amplissimi ordinis contemnenda maiestate uersatus est; Suet. *Tib.* 30: conservatis

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²² Kübler 1928, 543; Gundel 1963, 303, 305; Salvo 2013, 4236.

²³ Mommsen 1888, 1033.

²⁴ Mommsen 1888, 1033–1034+Anm. 1–2; Hellegouarch 1972, 311.

²⁵ For examples, see: Leist 1896, 2274.

²⁶ Hellegouarch 1972, 312.

²⁷ On the correlation of auctoritas and dignitas as applied to the Senate, see Balsdon 1960, 43–46.
²⁸ Gundel 1963, 308. Schmitzer (Schmitzer 2011, 191) says that some cases of mentioning the Senate's *maiestas* are found in Cicero and Livius. In our opinion, it is wrongful to place the data mentioned by two authors on a par, because they belong to different eras.

Livy is the first author of the Principate's epoch who believes that the Senate has *maiestas* but he talks about the republican *consilium publicum* (III 63, 10; IV 2, 4; VIII 34, 1)³⁰. Velleius is the first writer of the Imperial era to ascribe this quality to the Senate of his time. In his description of the Republican period, Velleius speaks of *auctoritas senatus*. He uses phrases such as *auctoritate senatus*, *auctore senatu* to talk about the Senate's actions³¹ and therefore does not diverge from the tradition of the Republican era.

Let us return to the phrase that interests us. At first sight, the description of the Senate's status in the passages in question seems the same (Vell. II 89,3.126, 2–3), but Ramage pointed out the fact that there are differences³². Describing Augustus' actions toward the Senate, Velleius writes, "restituta ... senatui maiestas". According to Woodman, in this instance "senatui maiestas refers to the *lectiones senatus* which are mentioned specifically by V. below"³³. Tiberius' actions are described differently, "accessit... senatui maiestas" (II 126, 2–3). According to Woodman, the phrase refers to "V.'s testimony to the part which Tiberius encouraged the senate to play in the everyday administration of the government"³⁴. If Augustus restored the Senate's prestige, in Velleius' view Tiberius increased its greatness³⁵. Conspicuous is the fact that, in the opinion of Paterculus, the Senate already had *maiestas*, Augustus only restored it, since it was lost during the civil war (II 89, 3). As was shown, the idea that the Senate has *maiestas* was not peculiar to the period of Republic.

In our opinion, the fact of attributing *maiestas* to the Senate by Velleius is remarkable. Roman historian endows the curia with a quality that in the previous epoch not only did not apply to it, but was associated with another object — the

senatui ac magistratibus et maiestate pristina et potestate; Flor. I 5,2: Hic et senatus maiestatem numero ampliavit; Plin. *Ep.* VIII 6,4: erat enim contra maiestatem senatus, si ferreis praetorius uteretur; Vit. Prob. XI, 3: vel illum vel alium quempiam maiestas vestra fecisset; Claud. *Cons. Manl.* XVI, 7–8: culmina Romani maiestatemque senatus et, quibus exultat Gallia, cerne viros.

³⁰ It is evident from said above there is no source of Republican period ascribing *maiestas* to the Roman Senate.

³¹ Vell. II 15,4: Quippe expulsum civitate a L. Saturnino tribuno plebis, quod solus in leges eius iurare noluerat, pietate sua, auctoritate senatus, consensu rei publicae restituit patrem. Nec triumphis honoribusque quam aut causa exilii aut exilio aut reditu clarior fuit Nurnidicus; II 20, 3: E qua pulsus collegae optimatiumque viribus cum in Campaniam tenderet, ex auctoritate senatus consulatus ei abrogatus est suffectusque in eius locum L. Cornelius Merula flamen dialis; II 34,3: Catilina metu consularis imperi urbe pulsus est; Lentulus consularis et praetor iterum Cethegusque et alii clari nominis viri auctore senatu, iussu consulis in carcere necati sunt; II 49, 2: Pompeium senatus auctoritas, Caesarem militum armavit fiducia.

³² Ramage 1982, 269.

³³ Woodman 1983, 253.

³⁴ Woodman 1977, 240.

³⁵ Ramage 1982, 269.

Roman people. This is already enough to cast doubt on Schmitzer's point of view, according to which Velleius's use of the term *maiestas* in relation to the curia suggests that, in the opinion of the Roman author, the Senate has become just a venerable institution with high regard, but ceased to be active in the sphere of politics³⁶.

It seems that the use of this term is a reflection of a more complex process: a change in the status of the Senate, which actively proceeded during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. It is necessary to address the following question. What is the reason for the acquisition of *maiestas* by the Senate?

Velleius Paterculus is not the only author of the time of the reign of the first two emperors, who believes that the Senate has "*maiestas*". Among these are previously mentioned Livy and Valerius Maximus. Despite the fact that they used the term with reference to the Republican Senate, significant is the era in which they wrote their works.

Maiestas with regard to the Senate are found in epigraphy besides literary monuments of the beginning of the Principate. During the reign of Tiberius in AD 19 the Senate's decree was passed prohibiting representatives of the senatorial and equestrian classes from performing on a theatrical stage or taking part in gladiatorial battles (AE 1978, 145)³⁷. The sixth line of the resolution states that the greatness of the Senate is damaged (AE 1978, 145 1.6: maiestatem senat [us minuerent) by those who continue to take part in the mentioned events. In the text of the decree the Senate itself clearly declares that it has *maiestas*. As far as we know, this *senatus consultum* is the first epigraphic evidence confirming the presence of the Senate's *maiestas*³⁸.

It is obvious that such frequent attribution of "greatness" to the Senate in the sources of the beginning of Principate is not accidental. What events could lead to the acquisition of this quality by the Senate?

In the end of the 19th century, T. Mommsen noted that when the Senate became the heir of the public assemblies as *senatus populusque Romanus*, it rightfully received *maiestas*. Mommsen makes reference to some passages from Valerius Maximus in support of his view (I 8,1; IX 5,1)³⁹.

In AD 14 elections of magistrates was actually transferred to the Senate (Tac. Ann. I.15.1). From this time on the Senate can be considered as the heir to the



³⁶ Schmitzer 2011, 191.

³⁷ See in more detail about this decree: Levick 1983, 97115; Lebek 1990, 37–96; Lebek 1991, 41–70.

³⁸ It is known the papyrus which preserved the speech of the Emperor Claudius in the Senate. In this text the *maiestas* of senatorial class is mentioned (BGU 611=CPL 236). See: Malavolta 1997, 474.

³⁹ Mommsen 1888, 1033, Anm. 1.

public assemblies. It is worth mentioning that transfer of elections to the Senate was not the only modification of the electoral process at the beginning of the Principate. Earlier, in AD 5, the *lex Valeria Cornelia* introduced ten additional centuries from senators and equites who were to vote in the elections of consuls and praetors before full comitia (THeb. 6–13). They compiled a list of candidates (destinatio). The vote took place in the assembly. At the same time, it is likely that not only the list of *destinati*, but of all candidates was put up for a vote by public assembly. In other words, the new centuries performed a recommendatory role⁴⁰.

It follows from the above that at the beginning of the Principate there is a gradual reduction in the real role of the public assembly in the election of magistrates. Growth of the functions of the Senate by reducing the role of the public assemblies could affect the status of the curia.

The political career of Velleius Paterculus proceeded during the period of the mentioned changes in the work of the comitia. He was elected quaestor in 6 AD (Vell. II.111.3) and praetor in 14 AD. During his election to praetorship he was on a list of *candidati Caesaris⁴¹*. The historian wrote his work at the time when the Senate had already officially declared that he had *majestas⁴²*. On this basis, it is reasonable to conclude that the endowment of "greatness" to the Senate by the Roman historian reflects the historical process that Velleius was witness to; it was the process during which the Senate appropriated powers traditionally characteristic of the Roman people.

Therefore, assigning *maiestas* to the Senate does not immediately mean that the curia's political role was in decline. On the contrary, it likely reflects the decline in significance of popular assemblies and documents the growing significance of the Senate. At the very least, the Senate already has *maiestas* in the eyes of some of its members.

It seems, the comitia no longer plays a significant role for Velleius. This conclusion could be drawn from the passages of his work, which briefly describes the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius respectively. Briefly talking about the actions of Augustus on resuscitation of *res publica* after the civil wars, the historian did not say a word about the restoration of activity of the public assemblies (II 89, 3–6). In the passage, which is the short outline of the reign of Tiberius, the

⁴⁰ Holladay 1978, 875, 887; Blochmann 2017, 138.

⁴¹ For the detail discussion of Velleius' career, see: Sumner 1970, 265–279.

⁴² There are divergent opinions on the date of finishing of the work by the Roman historian. According to Sumner book was finished in the late summer of A.D. 30 (Sumner 1970, 287). In Woodman's opinion Velleius began writing in the mid-twenties and stopped in January of A.D. 30 (Woodman 1975, 282). Rich supposes that Paterculus began to write sometime in AD 29 and finished at some point in AD 30 (Rich 2011, 86).

situation is more interesting: popular assemblies are mentioned, but Velleius did not say a word about their *majestas*. He writes:

summota e foro seditio, ambitio campo (II 126,2)

The historian reflects in a succinct formulation the transfer of elections to the Senate.⁴³

It is necessary to say one more thing. In our opinion it is unjustified that *auc*toritas senatus "remained only a fact of history, rather than a modern phenomenon", as Schmitzer suggests⁴⁴. Speaking on the period of Tiberius's reign, Paterculus says that the Emperor raised the fortunes of senators to the required rating according to the decision of the Senate (Vell. II 129,3: quotiens populum congiariis honoravit senatorumque censum, cum id senatu auctore facere potuit). It is noteworthy that Velleius says: *auctore senatu*. In other words, the Senate's *auctoritas* has not disappeared.

There are no other direct indications of Velleius Paterculus' views on the status of the Senate in the early Imperial years. Speaking of the uprising of legions by Rhine and Danube in 14 AD, during which the historian was in Rome, Paterculus writes the following:

"quin etiam ausi sunt minari daturos senatui, daturos principi leges; modum stipendii, finem militia sibi ipsi constituere conati sunt" (II 125, 2).

The Senate and the Princeps are both portrayed here as two equal institutions of power. Paterculus' other sentence clearly shows that in his view the Princeps holds a higher position in the "state" — he rises above others (II 124,2: eminentem ... principem).

In general, Velleius' account of the Empire presents the Senate as a more passive institution when compared to the description of the earlier era. Among the actions taken by the Imperial Senate and related by Velleius is proposition of the name "Augustus" (II 91,1). It seems fair to say that the Senate in Velleius' narrative looks as institution depending on the princeps. For example, the Senate gave powers to Tiberius on behalf of Augustus (II 121, 1). The Senate was seized with fear following the Emperor's death according to the historian (II 124, 1: trepidatio senatus). Then the Senate tried to persuade Tiberius to accept the power (II 124, 2).

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⁴³ On mentioned words of Velleius, see: Woodman 1977, 237.

⁴⁴ Schmitzer 2011, 189.

In conclusion, first of all it is necessary to say that Velleius Paterculus' use of the term *maiestas* in relation to the Senate is a reflection of a change in the position of the curia in the beginning of the Principate. Secondly, the Roman historian reflected the ambivalent position of the Senate under first two Emperors. On the one hand, along with *auctoritas* the curia began to possess *maiestas*. On the other hand, the facts reported by Velleius testify the Senate's dependence upon the Roman Emperor.

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