

Within the correspondence of the staunchly conservative late Roman senator, Q. Aurelius Symmachus, repeated reference is made to *ambitus*, a peculiarly republican form of corruption that most often denotes corrupt solicitation or electoral bribery and therefore operated against the personal ties of patronage. This paper argues that Symmachus used and adapted the cultural and literary construct of this classical vice to the socio-political circumstances of late antiquity in order to refine the boundaries of senatorial status and conduct at a time when they were becoming increasingly blurred.

During the fourth century, professional soldiers and career bureaucrats came to dominate both the imperial court and a rapidly expanding administrative apparatus. Additionally, an increasing number of offices within this nascent “professional” bureaucracy legally granted their occupants senatorial status upon retirement. With the creation of the senatorial bureaucrat came the development of new patronage networks and new criteria for access to government services and resources. Thus, members of the more established families of the Roman senate had to compete more and more within the field of patronage, and to defend the values that they attributed to their ancestors against a growing bureaucracy that charged fees for government services and encouraged the purchase of offices.

Within this context, the language of *ambitus* becomes particularly effective in demarcating a corporate elite identity and defending the operation of patronage in its traditional form. This term, and the act that it signified, is rooted both linguistically and conceptually in the moderate vice of *ambitio*. Together, these cognates play an important role in the Roman historiographical tradition, where charges of *ambitio* are frequently leveled at subversive plebeians, demagogic generals, and *populares* opponents of the senate. *Ambitus* itself was viewed as operating against the ties of patronage, replacing the virtuous relationship between patron and client with one of impersonal material gain. I propose that this connection between “ambitious” behavior and the *humiliores* of Roman society remained strong among the classically imbued senatorial aristocracy of late antiquity.

Throughout the Symmachean corpus, *ambitus* is portrayed as a disruptive element to the political and social order of Rome and its senate. It disturbed the observance of the traditional state cult, interfered in the proper administration of the city, and threatened the dignified *concordia* and, as a result, the *fama* of the senatorial order. Moreover, *ambitus* serves as a foil for traditional senatorial values such as *verecundia* and *pudor* that the Roman elite believed were cultivated in the exercise of patronage. Thus, in refashioning this republican vice, Symmachus intervened to curb the corrosive ambitions and corrupting influence of both the rapidly growing number of senatorial bureaucrats and those members of the more established families of the Roman senate whose conduct he deemed un-senatorial.