

J. Rufus FEARS

The Virtue of Mens: Roman Cult and Greek Thought

The cult of Mens illustrates in striking fashion the adaptation of a Greek ethical norm to the Roman religious, political, and social context. The establishment of a shrine to Mens was authorized at the behest of the Sibylline Books following the disastrous Roman defeat at Lake Trasimene in 217 BC. The action was taken at the instruction of Q. Fabius Maximus, who was dictator and augur and would become pontifex in 216. The introduction of the worship of Mens reflects the employment of cultic innovations to justify the policy of Fabius and his supporters. In their view, intelligent, prudent leadership, personified by Mens, is the only salvation for Rome in this critical situation. The strategy of Fabius Cunctator for dealing with Hannibal embodies this essential quality of prudence and common sense. In the view of Fabius and supporters, the disasters of Trebbia, Trasimene and Cannae have been the result of the foolish conduct of the war by People and their popular champions, C. Flaminius, M. Minucius Rufus and C. Terentius Varro. Fabius Pictor was a close associate of Cunctator and intimately involved in the religious policy of 216 BC, bringing the wisdom of Delphi to guide Roman policy. Pictor is the source for Livy's portrait of Fabius Maximus. Livy describes Fabius and his policies by such terms as *cautus*, *providus*, *consilium*, and *sollertia*. By contrast, *stultus*, *temeritas*, and *inscitia* define the character and actions of Flaminius, Minucius Rufus, and Varro (e.g. Livy 22.23, 28, 39). These men worship blind fortune, Livy tells us. Mens is the deity of Fabius Cunctator. This same quality of practical wisdom is celebrated by Polybius as the key to the great achievements of Q. Fabius Maximus. He was man, Polybius tells us, who combined practical wisdom (*phronesis*) with his outstanding ability (3.87).

From Homer onward, the Greeks, naturally enough, regarded wisdom an essential attribute of good government. The ruling office, as practiced by a true ruler, is a craft, a *techne*, that must be learned. Sagacity permeates every aspect of the government of a true ruler. This idea is central to Platonic, Aristotelian, and Hellenistic political thought. It is precisely this concept that the Roman thought to reproduce in the creation of a cult to Mens. *Phronesis* is the most obvious and best equivalent to what the Romans sought to express, in this context, by Mens. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is an essential feature of *arete*. In the view of Aristotle, if a person of good natural disposition acquires *phronesis*, then such a person excels in conduct and his natural disposition, which only previously resembled virtue, then becomes Virtue in the true sense of the word. (*Eth. Nic.* 6.13). In the Roman context, it was this quality of wisdom that had been lacking in the Second Punic War until Fabius Maximus. Without *phronesis/mens*, the Romans had been like Aristotle's man of powerful physique who, lacking sight, falls heavily when he attempts to move. Trebbia, Trasimene, and Cannae represented such falls. It was the goal of Fabius, in the critical months following Trasimene, to make the Roman People understand the importance of bringing such practical wisdom into their conduct of the war against Hannibal. Thus he established the cult of Mens. This was a sincere act and characteristically Roman. For the Roman, so essential a political quality as sound judgement must be due to the operation of a supernatural power. Hence it must be itself a divinity. Thus it must be brought into the political life of the Roman People by

establishing cult, controlling its beneficent power by regularizing its worship. Proper ritual authorization must be found for such an innovation by consulting the Sibylline Books. The cult of Mens must be further controlled by associating it closely with the worship of a more primary divinity, Venus of Eryx, the goddess who in the First Punic War had shown Rome the way to victory through sound strategy. Mens was one of a number of Virtues brought into Roman cult life during the Second Punic War. Behind such seemingly Roman forms as Mens, Juventas, and Honos and Virtus lay a process of fundamental historical consequence: the transmission of the basic language of Greek moral and political values and its absorption into the political vocabulary and structures of Rome.