

**Eric KONDRATIEFF**

**Tribunes and Topography: Popular Power in Public Spaces**

This presentation is a case study for reading tribunician power — represented by the tribunes' access to, control of or symbolic connection with important topographical features — in Rome's most familiar public space, the Forum Romanum. It will first address an interpretive issue arising from the reallocation of official space in the Forum in 75 B.C.E. Specifically, was the removal of the praetor's tribunal from the Forum's western end, an area associated with tribunician activity, an attempt to physically and symbolically isolate the tribunes, or a concession to the tribunate's revitalization? It will then consider the broader question of whether it was possible to isolate the tribunes in any meaningful way.

In recent years, opposing views have emerged regarding the physical and symbolic position held by the tribunes of the plebs in Rome's urban fabric during the Late Republic. One view, characterized by F. Millar's work (1984, 1986, 1989 and 1998), holds that popular sovereignty can be read in the physical development of Rome's political landscape, with the important corollary that the location or prominence of topographical features associated with tribunician activity reflects the importance of the tribunes themselves. Against this reading, L. Thommen (*Klio* 1995, 358-370) asserts that *post*-Sullan topographical changes in the Forum, notably the removal of the praetor's tribunal to the Forum's eastern end in 75, physically and symbolically isolated the tribunes from the machinery of government, and thus signaled their increasing irrelevance to both senate and *imperium*-wielding magistrates. This latter hypothesis only takes into account the shifting spatial relationships between topographical points, while ignoring a vast body of data that reveals how tribunes actually functioned within their evolving urban context in terms of their movements through, actions in, or occupation of various locales (not to mention the impact they had on the evolution of those and other locales through creative or destructive endeavors). This additional evidence suggests an interpretation for the removal of the praetor's tribunal that is diametrically opposed to Thommen's; moreover, it undercuts the notion of tribunician "isolation," whether physical or symbolic.

To begin with, the removal of the praetor's tribunal occurred in the same year that Sulla's ban on further offices for ex-tribunes was lifted, so it may be read as conceding to the tribunes, on a permanent basis, a wider venue in which they could carry out their traditional function of public speaking (and, ultimately, legislative activities). Indeed, such a concession may be seen as formalizing tribunician control of the Forum's western end, including the *septem iugera forensium* and the area before the Temple of Castor and Pollux, upon all of which the tribunes had been encroaching with *contiones* and *comitia* since at least the mid-second century (e.g., C. Licinius Crassus, *tr. pl.* 145). It may also be seen as a measure to avoid *avocatio* (the "calling away" of, or interference with a tribune's *contio*), a crime that brought capital charges (as in 187 and 169) or physical violence (as in 121 and 101) upon the perpetrator(s).

Furthermore, the relocation of the praetor's tribunal had no impact on interactions between tribunal and *subsellia*. There was no great distance to cover when L. Quinctius, *tr. pl.* 74, wished to bring an entire assembly to the praetor's tribunal to intimidate a jury, or when a convicted person or his legal agent desired to approach the tribunes' benches to request *auxilium* of some kind (as did Cicero in 71). Interestingly, both types of activity are attested for the period in which the tribunes were supposedly isolated.

Finally, the tribunician right to summon or arrest individuals, whether private citizens or public magistrates, made it virtually impossible to truly isolate the tribunes physically *or* symbolically, as long as they could exercise most (if not all) of their traditional powers. Indeed, they could literally bring the world to their doorstep through the agency of heralds and *viatores*, as exemplified in numerous Late Republic accounts of prominent Romans dragged before the tribunes' benches. In short, tribunes not only dominated the Forum proper, they could also make their dominance felt throughout the city and beyond.