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Classical Rhetoric
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Origins of Roman Rhetoric: Theft, Innovation and Time

There are three main forces that contributed to the development of Roman rhetoric: the Etruscans, the Greeks and the turbulent affairs within the city of Rome herself. The Etruscan people were a literate society and had a powerful hold on Rome before the republic. In fact, the last three kings of Rome were of Etruscan origin. The influence of the Greeks on the Romans is not unsurprising; however, the influence may have been more active on the Greek's part, and not merely a copy and paste effort by the Romans. Finally, the Romans, having demolished their kingship, were now in need of a use for their Etruscan built forum and with the establishment of a Republican senate and a court system with a jury, the need for rhetoric came full force.

As we know from Livy, the Romans, within their history, studied Etruscan and Greek literature (Enos 1) and the Etruscans, before the Romans ruled themselves, were a dominating force on the Italian peninsula, with kings ruling Rome proper (Enos 6). The Forum, Rome's place for public speaking, was constructed under Etruscan rule, creating the physical foundation for Rome to become a city of study and practice of rhetorical theory (Enos 13). In addition, the Latin words for many things dealing with writing come from Etruscan origin, which is undeniable evidence that their system for writing, at the very least, stemmed from the Etruscans (Enos 20). Under the influence and rule of the Etruscans, Rome developed not only her main venue that encouraged public speaking, she also gained the words and, possibly, the tools to write the speeches that would later be made (for if the words are of Etruscan origin, perhaps so were the tools, at least for the Romans).

The Greek influence in Rome is one that cannot be without mention, neither. In southern Italy there were many Greek colonies, so many, in fact, it was called Magna Graecia (Enos 15) and many sophists came to Italy and would travel around Italy, including Rome, to teach the art of discourse and persuasion (Enos 31). The influence of Greek rhetoric in Republican life became so recognized and feared that its teaching became outlawed (Enos 42). Of course, by the time it was outlawed everyone in the Forum likely knew how powerful of a force it was to speak eloquently and persuasively that it forced Romans to develop their own theories of rhetoric. This would also be outlawed sometime later, but the laws would not stand very long for Cicero notes his education in rhetoric in his *De Amicitia* (Enos 43).

The *Rhetoric* of Aristotle and the teachings by the sophists to Roman senators and consuls could not survive in Rome by their own, for Rome was not a democracy like Athens but a republic, so adjustments to the canons and theories had to be made for speech making to work effectively for the Romans. The situation, or *kairos*, when it comes to rhetoric is very important for rhetors to be able to pin point and place or else their speeches will not be effective and, in the case of Cicero, lead to his death if he is not careful or aware of his own place in society (Enos 60). We can see from Cicero's own development from *De Inventione* to *De Oratore* and *Topica* that Roman rhetoric was not a stagnant art, but a living one, adjusting to the appropriate form of the day.

The influences of Roman rhetoric stemmed from not only the cultures surrounding Rome, but the city herself. Etruscan and Greek influences on the art cannot be denied, but one should not fail to look past those influences and see how the Republic and civil wars forced the "stolen" rhetoric of the Greeks and Etruscans to a newly invented one that is appropriately Roman for the time.