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Food-riots at Rome

The food-riot was an increasingly common occurrence at Rome in the late Republic. These momentous occasions of collective action, however, did not hold the much interest for the aristocratic writers who recorded them: the questions of the group's demographics and the explicit reason for gathering and other questions a modern journalist would seek to answer—are unrecorded. For this reason the composition of the plebs, the term regularly used to designate the rioters, eludes. The question of who exactly went to contiones and compromised the politically-active group of plebs has been a particular interest over the past attention; less so what their ideals were. The phenomenon of group violence provides a unique hearing of the voice belonging to this otherwise mute group; and therewith an insight into their self-identification. This, of course, only works if the report contains more than a simple mention of a riot. This paper hence examines the riots of 75, 67, and 57, in each of which there is some form of evidence to handle. A statement from the rioters themselves requires the least amount deduction; one finds this in the riots of 57, when Cicero was returning from exile. When the rioters have no voice of their own, one must look to the measures taken and the defense offered by the party in the position of power, to whom the complain is lodged; this is the case for the riots in 75 and 67, when pirates disrupted grain shipments to Rome. Keeping in concert with the theme of the conference, it is hoped the revelation of a political ideology can bring us closer to the demographic identification of these people.