

Association of Ancient Historians - Mommsen Society 2025 Annual Lectures

“Mors pro patria: Murder, Suicide, and Sacrifice in Ancient Rome”

Celia E. Schultz, University of Michigan

This paper revisits the murder of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus in a melee on the Capitoline Hill in 133 B.C.E. The most famous of interpretation of this episode is D. C. Earl's dramatic declaration in his 1961 biography of Gracchus that Scipio Nasica, who veiled his head before leading a crowd of senators against the tribune and his supporters, sacrificed Gracchus to save the state (Earl 1961: 119). This explanation has been pooh-poohed, for very good reasons, by scholars who have sought to identify other forms of ritual killing that might fit the bill. My argument is, at first glance, paradoxical. I argue that there no reason to accept Earl's historical interpretation, but also that Earl was right, just not in the way he imagined. Our sources indeed include the image of Nasica's veiled head to evoke human sacrifice in the mind of the reader, but they do not include this detail because that is what happened in 133. It has more to do with the Greek literary imagination and Greek ideas about Roman sacrifice than anything that actually happened in that moment of political crisis in Rome. To make my case, I look at the presentation of other episodes of Late Republican political murders and suicides.

“Romana mors? Female Suicide in Roman Funerary Culture”

PD Dr. Burkhard Emme, University of Rostock

In Roman literature and art, suicide features frequently as a reaction to the death of a loved one, especially -if not exclusively- in case of women. The motif can be found in historical accounts as well as in mythological narratives and images. The lecture deals with different aspects of this phenomenon: its roots in auto-aggressive behavioral patterns in case of bereavement, its significance for the construction of gender-specific roles, its connection to a general Roman 'culture of exemplarity' and its metaphorical function as an expression of loyalty and closeness in the funerary context.

Friday, October 10, 2025 at 6 p.m. (CEST– 12 p.m. EST- 9 a.m. PST)

The lectures will take place via Zoom. To participate, you need to register by sending an e-mail to Lukas Reimann: reimann@uni-trier.de