Spotlight

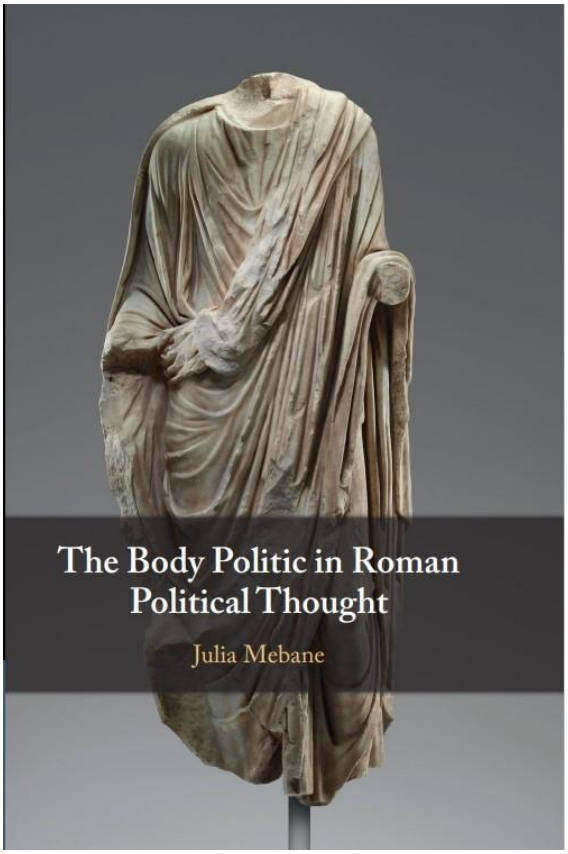
Hello Classical Studies Alumni!

As the spring semester drew to a close we gathered to celebrate our graduating seniors as well as the accomplishments of our graduate students and faculty which include several books and fellowships. This Spotlight focuses one notable achievement: Professor Julia Mebane won the Charles J. Goodwin Award of Merit for her 2025 book, *The Body Politic and Roman Political Thought*, her first book. This award is the only honor for scholarly books given by the Society for Classical Studies, and it usually goes to senior scholars. It is an exceptional honor for Mebane to receive this award for her first book and a sign of her scholarly talent. The citation celebrates her for research that "speak[s] eloquently to the politicization of public health in our own time" and "[invests] a timeless, even ubiquitous metaphor with fresh, urgent vitality."

Comparisons between civic communities and living organisms are everywhere. We call our president the "head of state" and our republic the "body politic"; politicians speak of diseases that need to be cured and even rotten limbs that should be amputated. This rhetoric goes back to the emergence of the Greek *polis* in the sixth century BCE, but it took on new life in the Roman world. Mebane's book, *The Body Politic and Roman Political Thought*, explores how Roman thinkers used the metaphor of the body politic to respond to constitutional change between the first century BCE and first century CE. It confronts a paradox familiar to students of classical antiquity: although sole rule had arrived in Rome by 27 BCE, Roman writers declined to acknowledge its existence for nearly a century. Only under Nero did Seneca finally admit that the *princeps* was like a king. What should we make of this disjuncture between constitutional form and political language?

Mebane's book answers this question by turning towards the imaginative realm of figurative speech. Even as Romans insisted upon the survival of their ancestral *res publica*, they also radically reimagined its shape in response to the establishment of the principate. Under the Republic, Rome was conceptualized as an autonomous organism composed of interdependent parts. By the downfall of Nero, it had been reconfigured as a collection of warring limbs unable to survive without a commanding head of state. Drawing on thinkers from Cicero to Livy to Seneca, Mebane tells the story of how Rome acquired a head. It thereby shows how Romans came to terms with autocracy without ever naming it as such.

Mebane is at work on a second book, tentatively titled *The Shipwrecked Republic*. This book considers another familiar metaphor of civic organization: the ship of state. Drawing

inspiration from the “blue humanities,” an interdisciplinary field that stresses the subjective experience of the vast power of the ocean, it explores the stormy seas, voracious whirlpools, treacherous cliffs, and leaky hulls that the Roman ship of state encountered on its travels. Mebane uses these maritime obstacles to put themes of imperialism, greed, fear, and violence back into the story of the world’s longest-lasting republic. In this way, her new book prompts us to consider the nature of the legacy we have inherited from classical antiquity.

Mebane’s research goes hand-in-hand with her teaching at IU. She has recently developed a popular new course in Ancient Warfare, and in her Latin classes teaches students the close-reading skills that allow them to interpret the figurative expressions that she studies. Such metaphors and imagery are usually lost in translation; only close attention to the Latin allows us to appreciate Cicero’s figuration of the Catilinarian conspirators as the “bilgewater of the republic.” In a course on the Catilinarians, for example, she asks students to trace a trope or symbol over the semester and analyze in a final paper. They thereby gain firsthand experience in the sort of philological research made possible by a Classics degree.