



SOCIETAS STUDIORUM
KATHARINA VOLK

Katharina Volk (M.A. Munich, Ph.D. Princeton) is Professor of Classics at Columbia University. A specialist in Latin literature and Roman culture by training and an intellectual historian by vocation, she is particularly interested in the intersections of knowledge and politics, poetry and philosophy, and actions and ideas. Volk is the author of *The Poetics of Latin Didactic: Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, Manilius* (2002), *Manilius and his Intellectual Background* (2009), and *Ovid* (2010; German 2012), as well as numerous articles ranging from Homeric formula to Roman antiquarianism. She has edited or co-edited six volumes and from 2010 to 2013 served as the Editor of *Transactions of the American Philological Association*. Her project at the Wissenschaftskolleg (and for the years to come) concerns the intellectual history of the late Roman Republic and features such illustrious old Romans as Cicero, Caesar, Brutus, Cassius, Varro, and Nigidius Figulus. – Address: Department of Classics, Columbia University, 1130 Amsterdam Ave., 617 Hamilton Hall, New York, NY 10027, USA. E-mail: kv2018@columbia.edu.

My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was dedicated to *Wissenschaft* – not just my own scholarly work, but also the intellectual activities of a group of long-dead individuals, Roman senators whose ideas and writings in the mid-first century B.C.E. produced an unprecedented cultural flourishing at the same time as their inherited political system of republican governance was falling to pieces around them. One of the things that struck me about these men was the way they tended to view scholarship as a communal activity, best experienced with likeminded friends in what they liked to call a *Societas Studiorum*, a “community of studies”, and what we might simply refer to as “Wiko”. For as I immersed

myself more fully in the intellectual mores of both Via Appia and Wallotstraße, it seemed to me that the boundaries between the frame and the picture of my scholarly endeavors were beginning to blur, with uncanny and exhilarating similarities emerging between the sociability of *Wissenschaft* then and now.

While the cast of characters was admittedly somewhat different – there Cicero, Caesar, and Brutus, here Hubert Wolf, Myles Jackson, and Mary O’Sullivan – the activities we moderns engaged in were pretty much the same as those of our ancient precursors: *legere et scribere*, “reading and writing”, was the Roman intellectual’s shorthand for doing research and is still an accurate description of what most of us were practicing during our ten months in Berlin (that is, when we were not at the Komische Oper, biking in the Grunewald, or exploring the dining options in the Scheunenviertel). Just like the 21st-century Wiko Fellows, the Ciceros and Caesars of old circulated drafts of their work among their peers, hoping for feedback and (ideally) praise. They regaled one another with copies of their books, often with elaborate dedications and the more or less explicit expectation of a counter-dedication down the line. Of course, they discussed their ideas, in smaller and larger groups, and had their vociferous disagreements. Can all human behavior be explained by tracing the interactions of matter within the human body? Is there an ethical code behind and above all positive law? Some of the questions that exercised the folks I study still resonate around the Kolloquiumraum over 2,000 years later.

Needless to say, there were many lighter moments. Just like us at Wiko, those ancient Romans loved to exchange ideas over food and, of course, drink, though their poison of choice was Falernian rather than Rheinhessen Riesling. Already then, the backdrop of intellectual activity was the villa: whenever they had a chance, Roman aristocrats flocked to their country places in the Alban Mountains or the Bay of Naples – Grunewald *avant la lettre* – to enjoy the scenery and pen their immortal works. Then as now, the arts provided an important counterpoint to research and study: just as mid-first century Romans listened to Catullus and Lucretius, we were enchanted by Carey Harrison and Sinan Antoon; as they surrounded themselves with Greek statuary, we gazed on the works of Susan Ossman and Claire Lambe; as they enjoyed the flute and the lyre, we were treated to the premiere of Alberto Posada’s *Rhapsody on a Bavarian Beer Bottle*. But alas, just like in the last days of the Roman Republic, not all was well with the world during our time at Wiko: politics kept intruding on our *villeggiatura*, just as it did for Cicero and his friends, and just as they occasionally had to rush back to Rome and try to shore up (or tear down) the commonwealth, thus we were inspired by current events to march for

science – even if we never quite got around to the much anticipated March of the Naked Intellectuals.

But let me not push the parallel too far. There were some important differences between the *Societas Studiorum Wikoniana* and that of 2,000 years ago. Unlike the Romans of old, we did not rely on slave labor but on the outstanding Wiko staff, who – we fervently hope – enjoy a somewhat superior *qualité de vie au travail*. Instead of having to harass our friends to lend us books (as we find Cicero doing again and again in his letters), we could rely on those miracle workers of the Wiko library to conjure up – apparently out of thin air and in record time – even the most obscure volumes. Instead of feeding on the questionable delicacies of ancient Rome (dormice in honey, anyone?), we were treated to delicious cuisine curated by Dunia Najjar and prepared by the fantastic team at the Wiko kitchen. And instead of having to rush home every few days and attend meetings of the senate, address the Roman people, or prepare for the conquest of Gaul, we were enjoying near-eternal *Feriae Latinae* in this Arcadia on the Halensee.

So, to come to the question that the senators of old asked themselves when returning from their country seats: did I get any work done? Unlike Cicero, who at his best times produced about a book a month, I am bound to give the ritual answer, “not as much as I was hoping”. Nevertheless, I am pleased. I completed two sizeable chapters of my monograph, both of which address the interplay of philosophy and politics in the late Republic. In this context, I explored specifically the topics of Epicurean political engagement, of the political messages of Cicero’s philosophical corpus of the 40s B.C.E., and of the role of philosophy in the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44. I also wrote a chapter for an edited volume on the question whether Caesar was an Epicurean (my Solomonic answer: in part), as well as two conference papers on subjects a bit further afield. The first (for a meeting in Rome to commemorate the death of the Roman poet Ovid 2,000 years ago) discussed the depiction of Julius Caesar’s assassination and apotheosis in the *Metamorphoses*, while the second (for a conference on apocalypse and eschatology in Cambridge) considered the question whether the Romans of the mid-first century experienced the end of the Republic as though it were the end of the world.

Luckily, the end of our Fellowship at Wiko will not be the end of the world (even if a certain doomsday mood lies over Wallotstraße on these, our last days) nor will it, we hope, be the end of our particular *Societas Studiorum*. This will continue in print, in cyberspace, and in future encounters, even if for now, we all leave behind the villa and return to real life.