Easy Money, Elite Anxiety and Rome’s First Anti-Gambling Law

The first anti-gambling statute in Ancient Rome, the *Lex Alearia* dates to c. 200 BCE. This was a time of rapid change and intense legislative activism spearheaded by political elites. Much pertained to the Second Punic War, while some dealt with matters of public order or standards of conduct for elites. In the wake of one war and on the eve of another, why was gambling a priority?

While the historical record provides neither debates nor the wording of the statute, the answer lies in upper-class Romans’ reactions to social and economic change. The population was growing, and it seemed Rome had morphed into a massive urban conglomeration. Increased monetization of the economy potentially undercut the supremacy of landed wealth, which undergirded elite power. Many feared the transfer of family wealth to shady tradesmen by irresponsible relations. However exaggerated, perception won the day. Elites scrambled to stem waste by the wealthy and police the taverns whose habitues gambled, brawled – and scammed noble youths.

Drawing upon research on Roman law and mid-republican Rome to situate the *lex Alearia* in context, this study elucidates both the origins of Rome’s anti-gambling laws and the mechanics of misperception and overreaction driving opposition to gambling.