

Quid nunc commemorem dictaturae hoc ipso consulari [imper]ium
valentius repertum apud maiores nostros quo in a[s]terioribus bellis aut
in civili motu difficiliore uterentur?

Why need I now call to mind the dictatorship, with an imperium stronger
even than the consuls', devised by our ancestors to be made use of in
exceptionally perilous wars or truly difficult civil disturbances?

SPEECH OF CLAUDIUS CAESAR¹

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Introduction

The Roman story is one of survival through adaptation. The problem of the executive is a case in point. When, according to age-old legends, the election of one chosen man to lifelong rule gave way to despotism and contempt for Roman values, the Romans shed their monarchy for shared aristocratic governance via annual collegial magistracies. The Romans soon discovered, however, that this correction, while in many ways advantageous, created new vulnerabilities. The ordinary magistrates were elected according to general qualifications expected of all Roman clan leaders. What happened when a desperate crisis was best solved by a man who happened not to be among those presently invested with the power of office and the authority to command?

For this contingency the Romans developed a singular response. Whenever an emergency—whether domestic, military, or religious—was not best solved by the magistrates already in power, the Roman people or the senate could call upon the consuls to cede superior executive authority to one individual suited by experience and temperament to resolve that crisis and restore Rome to its previous state of safety and stability. Effectively this invoked an emergency alternate executive for the duration of the crisis: a temporary dominion of the needed man. On resolution of the inciting problem, his last act was to abdicate his authority and restore ordinary government.

1. *CIL* 13.01668; cf. *Tac. Ann.* 11.24.

Thus was born the dictatorship, a merger of dread power and chosen champion so effective the Romans recorded at least eighty-five instantiations over the three centuries between the Republic's founding and the final defeat of Hannibal at the end of the third century. To the Romans it was an intrinsic and necessary part of the Republic—both the last recourse in extremity and, when matters were at their worst, the sole hope of the Roman people. Chosen by consuls in solemn communion with the gods, dictators were of greater antiquity than censors, praetors, or proconsuls; more useful than the interrex; more universally trusted than consuls or senators. The mere appointment of one might unify fractious citizens, rally despondent troops, and dismay enemies. The ranks of the dictatorship were populated with Rome's greatest heroes and statesmen, whether renowned for military acumen, definitive humility, fierce determination, or incorruptible character. It was an office of equal utility in repelling invaders, quashing insurrections, rooting out corruption, curating reform, or propitiating angry gods, always with the purpose of ensuring that the whole city of Rome was kept safe and secure.

As the Republic changed, the dictatorship changed with it. Dictators continued saving Rome from threats within, without, and above, but new kinds of dictators also faced self-contained needs and progressively freed consuls for longer and more distant wars by conducting elections, managing games, and generally serving as a stand-in executive. Eventually the Republic's expanding dominion meant that a champion of the city-state was no longer required; the last dictator of the old form was named in the dying days of the war with Hannibal, the war that more than any other transformed Rome from a regionally important city into the master of a growing Mediterranean empire.

Each dictatorship was a distinct response to a singular disruption of the state. Dictators accomplished deeds great and subtle; remained in office for hours or months; were remembered forever or vanished into obscurity. Each was unique; yet each was also the same. Every dictator, whether named to destroy armies or to drive a single nail into a temple wall, stood alone at the same forbidding, unassailable acme of power within the Roman world.

After the Second Punic War the dictatorship was in disuse for 120 years, until a brutal populist revolution spurred a conservative maverick named Sulla to revive the dictatorship for his own ends. Thirty-three years later, the political heir of Sulla's greatest enemy, Caesar, took Rome for the populares and made himself dictator of the city and all its domains. By iterating the dictatorship and

wresting it from its ancient moorings Caesar carved a template for the permanent migration of power from systems and institutions to men who ruled by personal authority.



The dictatorship falls into three distinct periods, each of immense interest. First was the period of routine use, the first three centuries of the Roman Republic. During this time, men from a wide range of families and backgrounds were regularly invested with total executive power; this they invariably applied to the resolution of the crises that had brought them to power, then renounced, often within days. Much as with the Republic itself, each century saw a transformed dictatorship: in the fifth it was brought into use for the salvation of Rome during great emergencies, domestic and military; in the fourth was added single-task dictatorships, so that dictators might be named for great undertakings or for a single ritual; in the third dictators increasingly stood in for consuls, whether passing laws or conducting elections at home or on the battlefield after a disastrous loss. The dictatorship was the most fluid and dynamic of Republican institutions, always temporarily replacing the ordinary government with what was needed in that moment.

In this work the dictatorship found in this period is referred to as the archaic dictatorship, to distinguish it from the form of dictatorship employed later in the first century BCE.²

The second period was the desuetude between 202 and 82 BCE. The question of exactly why the Romans abandoned the dictatorship, when the uses to which the office had always been put did not go away after Hannibal's defeat at Zama, is as intriguing as the correlative questions of what they did instead and what echoes persisted of the archaic office across generations of disuse.

Last came its resurrection under Sulla and Caesar. Their autocracies have been labeled by some authorities as dictatorships in name only; yet both these men revived the ancient authority of the dictatorship for reasons that suited the conditions in which Rome found itself. What did the moribund dictatorship mean to Sulla, that he should choose it as the instrument of his reform? What might the manner in which Sulla and Caesar used the dictatorship tell us about

2. This is not meant to cause confusion with other uses of the term "archaic" with reference to Roman or Greek history, language, or archaeology, and here applies strictly to the original permutations of the dictatorship, not to any other element of Roman government or politics.

Rome in the first century, and the forms of government that followed the last dictator's demise?

The story of the dictatorship is told in retrospect. The self-history of Rome is late; what follows in this book is, for the most part, not a contemporary narrative of current events but a looking back at the formation, growth, and culmination of the Roman polity. It is the story of how the Romans understood this critical and evolving element of the Republican system; the story of the making of themselves, from the Romans' own perspective.



This study is divided into parts. Here in part I, we introduce the dictatorship, discuss the varieties and limitations of the available evidence, and examine in detail how authorities told and valued the origin stories of the dictatorship in relation to the early Republic and the dictatorship's later development.

In part II we step through the stages of an archaic dictatorship as employed in the fifth, fourth, and third centuries. These include the perception of need; the call for a dictator by the senate or the people; the choice of a dictator by a consul or consular tribune; the dictator's mandate, and how his imperium was directed toward its fulfillment; the complex question of the dictator's answerability for his actions; the role of the dictator's constant lieutenant, the *magister equitum*;³ and the dictator's renunciation of office on completion of his task. An attempt is then made to formulate the principles that consistently, even invariably, governed the operation of the archaic dictatorship. Along the way we take notice of how the dictatorship changed, the role of precedent as the determining force in the dictatorship's continued utility, and key instances of innovation and aberration.

Part III, in turn, covers the desuetude of the dictatorship and its subsequent disinterment under Sulla and Caesar, with attention to the ongoing transformation of the Republic, the processes and dynamics that developed in the third and second centuries to replace the dictatorship, and the specific uses to which Sulla and Caesar put the revived office, along with some general conclusions. Each of the first three parts is accompanied by case studies delving into decisive

3. In this book I retain the Latin term *magister equitum* rather than translating it into English as "master of the horse." The reasons are discussed at the start of ch. 10, but here it may be said that the English term is misleading, since the *magister equitum* functioned as a lieutenant and not, except on the rare occasions when assigned this duty, as cavalry commander.

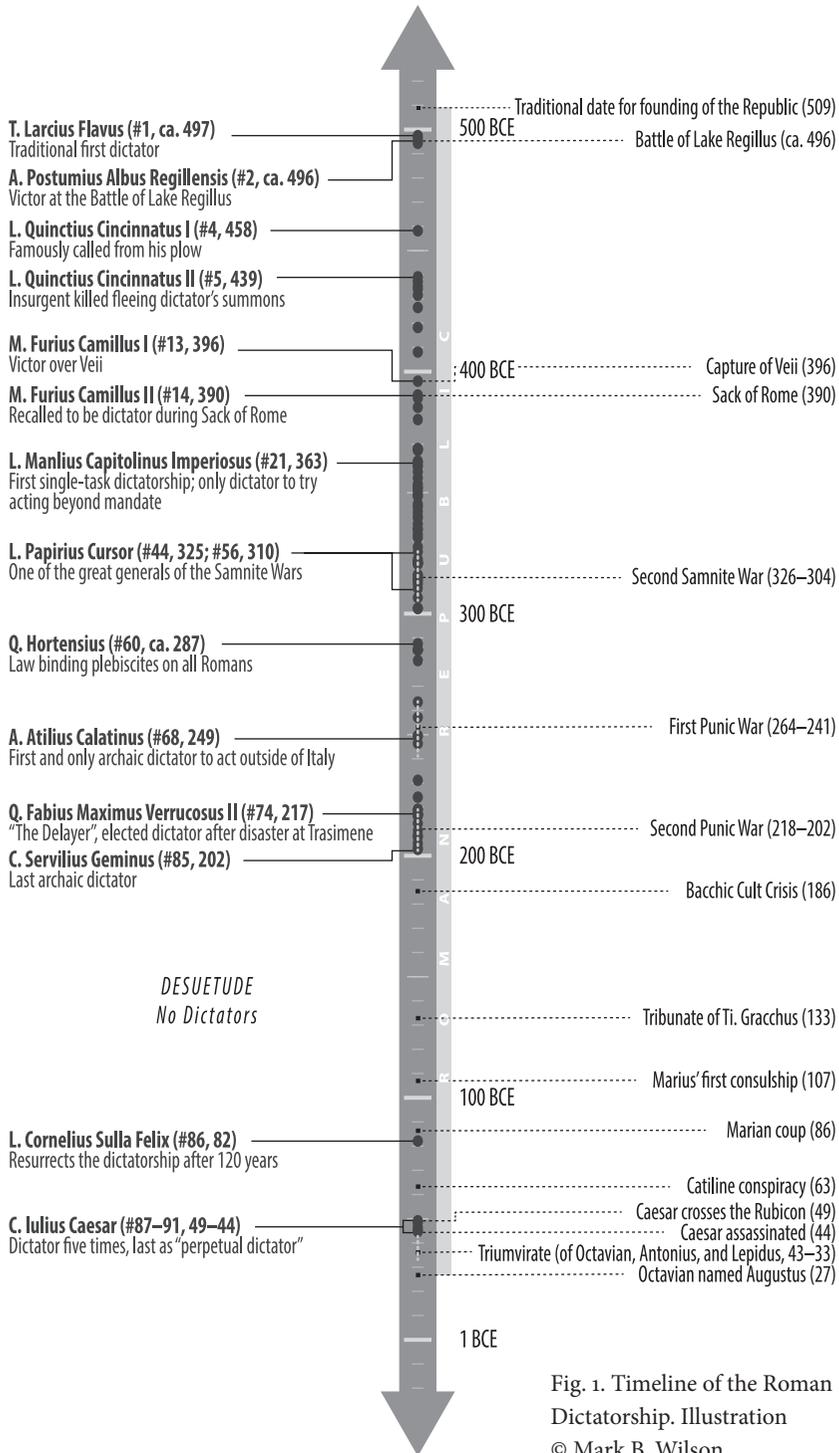


Fig. 1. Timeline of the Roman Dictatorship. Illustration
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incidents or examining characterizations of the office and its incumbents from key classical authorities.

Finally, in the appendices are included a catalog of all recorded and posited dictators and their nomination, use, and exit from the office; lists of officeholders and relevant terms; and a discussion of previous scholarship on the dictatorship.

Extensive use of primary sources is employed throughout in an effort to glean as much as possible of the Roman perspective on their ancient office, always bearing in mind the profound caveats discussed in the next chapter. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. Dates (years or centuries) are BCE unless noted.⁴

4. For dating issues see appendix C, s.v. “Varronian year” and appendix D.