

Servius Tullius's Reform of the Comitia Centuriata

Source: Dion. Hal. RA 4.20-21. Translated by Earnest Cary. In *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus*. Loeb classical library. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1937.

The comitia centuriata, or centuriate assembly, was conceived as the army sitting as a legislature. Just as the army was arranged according to class, so too was the comitia centuriata. Its structure as known in the middle republic was associated with Servius Tullius, the penultimate king.

Having by this means laid upon the rich the whole burden of both the dangers and expenses and observing that they had become discontented, he contrived by another method to relieve their uneasiness and mitigate their resentment by granting to them an advantage which would make them complete masters of the commonwealth, while he excluded the poor from any part in the government; and he effected this without the plebeians noticing it. This advantage that he gave to the rich related to the assemblies, where the matters of greatest moment were ratified by the people.

I have already said before that by the ancient laws the people had control over the three most important and vital matters: they elected the magistrates, both civil and military; they sanctioned and repealed laws; and they declared war and made peace. In discussing and deciding these matters they voted by curiae, and citizens of the smallest means had an equal vote with those of the greatest; but as the rich were few in number, as may well be supposed, and the poor much more numerous, the latter carried everything by a majority of votes.

Tullius, observing this, transferred this preponderance of votes from the poor to the rich. For whenever he thought proper to have magistrates elected, a law considered, or war to be declared, he assembled the people by centuries instead of by curiae. And the first centuries that he called to express their opinion¹ were those with the highest rating, consisting of the eighteen centuries of cavalry and the eighty centuries of infantry.

As these centuries amounted to three more than all the rest together, if they agreed they prevailed over the others and the matter was decided. But in case these were not all of the same mind, then he called the twenty-two centuries of the second class; and if the votes were still divided, he called the centuries of the third class, and, in the fourth place, those of the fourth class; and this he continued to do till ninety-seven centuries concurred in the same opinion.

And if after the calling of the fifth class this had not yet happened but the opinions of the hundred and ninety-two centuries were equally divided, he then called the last century, consisting of the mass of the citizens who were poor and for that reason exempt from all military service and taxes; and whichever side this century joined, that side carried the day. But this seldom happened and was next to impossible. Generally the result was determined by calling the first class, and it rarely went as far as the fourth; so that the fifth and the last were superfluous.

In establishing this political system, which gave so great an advantage to the rich, Tullius outwitted the people, as I said, without their noticing it and excluded the poor from any part in public affairs. For they all thought that they had an equal share in the government because every man was asked his opinion, each in his own century; but they were deceived in this, that the whole century, whether it consisted of a small or a very large number of citizens, had but one vote; and also in that the centuries which voted first, consisting of men of the highest rating, though they were more in number than all the rest, yet contained fewer citizens; but, above all, in that the poor, who were very numerous, had but one vote and were the last called.

When this had been brought about, the rich, though paying out large sums and exposed without intermission to the dangers of war, were less inclined to feel aggrieved now that they had obtained control of the most important matters and had taken the whole power out of the hands of those who were not performing the same services; and the poor, who had but the slightest share in the government, finding themselves exempt both from taxes and from military service, prudently and quietly submitted to this diminution of their power; and the commonwealth itself had the advantage of seeing the same persons who were to deliberate concerning its interests allotted the greatest share of the dangers and ready to do whatever required to be done.

This form of government was maintained by the Romans for many generations, but is altered in our times and changed to a more democratic form, some urgent needs having forced the change, which was effected, not by abolishing the centuries, but by no longer observing the strict ancient manner of calling them²—a fact which I myself have noted, having often been present at the elections of their magistrates. But this is not the proper occasion to discuss these matters.

¹ If taken literally, this expression is erroneous. The popular assemblies were not deliberative bodies; they could merely vote "aye" or "no" to a specific proposal. But probably Dionysius meant no more by his expression than "give their vote."

² No ancient writer gives us an explicit account of this reform of the comitia centuriata; but from scattered allusions it is known that each of the five classes later contained 80 companies (one of seniores and one of iuniores from each of the 35 tribes). To these 350 centuries must be

added the centuries of knights (probably 18, as before, though 35 and even 70 have been suggested), and perhaps also those of the artisans and musicians (4 as before?) and the one century of proletarii. The knights no longer voted first, but one century out of the first class (or possibly out of all five classes) was chosen by lot to give its vote first; then followed the knights and the several classes in a fixed order. This reform may have been introduced at the time when the last two tribes were created, in 241 BCE. Livy's statement (1.43.12) is tantalizingly brief.