



FRANCISCO PINA POLO (ed.)

***CURSUS
HONORUM:***

**PATHWAYS TO RANK
AND POWER
IN THE ROMAN REPUBLIC**

EDITORIAL UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA
PRENSAS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

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Edited by
Francisco Pina Polo

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info-eus@us.es <https://editorial.us.es>

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INTRODUCTION

Francisco Pina Polo

Universidad de Zaragoza

One of the most distinctive features of the political culture of the Roman Republic was the competition and rivalry among individuals and families of the social elite. This rivalry came to head at the annual elections for the appointment of the new magistrates entrusted with the administration of Rome and the empire, who had a wide range of duties that increased and changed over time: the maintenance of the city, the control of the state bureaucracy, the supervision of financial resources, the presidency of the courts, the command of the legions and so on. Every year, a number of Roman citizens ran for office and whereas some obtained sufficient votes from the people, others were defeated and had to wait for a new opportunity or abandon their political aspirations.

Depending on the magistracies, the candidates were of different ages, but they all belonged to the well-to-do because the Romans never considered the possibility of remuneration for those who held public office, which automatically excluded citizens without the means to devote their time to public service rather than working for a living: holding a magistracy was an honour (*honor*), and honours (*honores*) should not be remunerated – although they could offer opportunities for amassing wealth – because, in essence, they were conceived as a privilege of the ruling class. This state of affairs gave rise to an aristocracy of function and merit that was best exemplified by the Senate, the body to which former magistrates belonged for life and where Rome's domestic and foreign policy was determined. Obviously, there is no need to recall that this competition was the exclusive preserve of men.

The Roman Republican institutions as a whole were never created by a demiurge at a precise moment. The magistracies, in particular, were the result of a long process of adaptation to the needs of a growing state, based on the pragmatism that always characterised the Romans. The initial aim of the magistracies was to ensure the most efficient administration of a city in Latium that was progressively expanding into Italy, before subsequently being adapted to a power that eventually dominated the entire Mediterranean, thus requiring a provincial administration. The final result was a body of annual elective offices: quaestors, aediles, tribunes of the plebs, praetors and consuls, plus the censors elected every five years and the extraordinary dictators, to which were then added the promagistracies (proconsuls, propraeors and proquaestors) that became commonplace as of the 2nd century. The number of magistrates increased progressively throughout the Republic, and by the 1st century more than forty were elected every year. Consequently, the number of candidates involved in the annual elections could be considerable.

Although holding public office implied belonging to the elite, whose prestige and social recognition (*fama*, *dignitas* and, eventually, *auctoritas*) was enhanced as a result, not all magistracies granted their incumbents the same rank, which gradually increased with the holding of different offices and whose hierarchical structure was reflected in the Senate. The political career of a Roman citizen during the Republic always took the shape of an implicitly hierarchical ladder whose rungs corresponded to the age at which one or other magistracy was attained. While military command was generally in the hands of men of proven experience, young novices occupied positions, not without responsibility – the duties of quaestors, for example, were much more important than they might seem at first glance –, in which they had to prove their management and leadership skills in order to aspire to higher offices. Yet management skills were obviously not the only factor that was taken into account in an individual's potential promotion. Other random factors, such as specific political circumstances or, in particular, being a member of a prestigious and influential family, played a considerable role in the development of a political career.

This implicit institutional hierarchy – with its nuances, as can be seen in the initial relationship between praetors and consuls, less unequal than one might think – was apparently established at the beginning of the 2nd century, against the backdrop of fierce competition among the members of the aristocracy. As is commonly held, the *lex Villia annalis* of 180 resulted in a *cursus honorum*, viz. 'a career of honours', which thenceforth had mandatory

rules indicating the path that should be followed by those who wanted to pursue a political career and the order in which they should do so, as well as age requirements. If the hierarchy of power had been previously implicit, thenceforth it was explicit, which was reflected in the Senate where the ranks of *quaestorii*, *tribunicii*, *aedilicii*, *praetorii* and *consulares* were a clear indication of the highest office reached hitherto.

This book, which deals with the position of the *cursus honorum* in Republican history, addresses questions relating to how Roman citizens pursued political careers during the Republic. It not only examines the specific repercussions of holding magistracies for such careers but also the possible consequences of refusing to run for or take up office. Additionally, it reflects on the development of the *cursus honorum* throughout the Roman Republic, as well as on the way scholarship has constructed its image and political and social significance in Roman political culture.

In the first chapter, Federico Santangelo performs a detailed analysis of the initial historiographical approaches to the concept of *cursus honorum*. The patterns of office-holding of Republican magistrates have been a topic of much debate since the early modern period. As in so many other aspects, Mommsen's *Staatsrecht* led to the codification of a vision of Republican magistracies on which there has been a lasting consensus and which, to a great extent, still forms the basis of current research. Mommsen's construction was, however, the culmination of a body of scholarship that had already shed a fair amount of light on the patterns of office-holding in the Republican period.

Studies of the history of the Roman magistracies are usually based on the common conception that the *cursus honorum* governed the political careers of the Roman elite. While the moment in which this *cursus* was introduced is not stated explicitly in the sources, Livy assumes that the first critical piece of legislation was the *lex Villia annalis* in 180, when legislation would have replaced the ordering practice of tradition. Livy's reference is generally regarded as the year in which the formal *cursus honorum* was established. In his chapter, Hans Beck argues that the *cursus honorum* was never systematised in the sense suggested by constitutionalised interpretations of Roman Republican history: career paths were ever-changing and the *cursus honorum* was intertwined with the governance of the *res publica* as a whole.

The first centuries of the Roman Republic were, in any case, a period of institutional experimentation in which a firmly established political career path could hardly exist. This was particularly evident in the 5th century.

Thibaud Lanfranchi analyses the case of military tribunes with consular power (*tribuni militum consulari potestate*), an elusive but historical office that must be understood in relation to the context of the mid-5th century, on the one hand, and to the progressive establishment of Republican institutions during the period, on the other. Lanfranchi studies the role of consular tribunes in the evolution of the very idea of magistracy in Rome and in the development of the *cursus honorum*. Continuing in the period before the *lex Villia annalis*, Francisco Pina Polo examines the political career of ex-consuls in the 4th and 3rd centuries with an eye to shedding further light on the offices they held and other public roles they performed once they had attained the consulship. In short, the intention is to determine the shape the political career of a consular took in a period when Rome was involved in major wars in Italy, such as the Samnite wars and the conflict against Pyrrhus, and subsequently in the Mediterranean against Carthage.

The first contact a Roman citizen had with the administration before holding his first magistracy was through a wide range of junior offices (*tresviri capitales*, *duoviri navales*, etc.). Consequently, these little known and often neglected junior offices are essential components for reconstructing the Roman political system and culture during the Republic. In this vein, Marian Helm focuses on the *tribuni militum*, for whom we are relatively well informed in comparison to other lower offices. In a society in which the importance of military experience was beyond doubt for the Roman elite, unsurprisingly military service was of utmost importance – an obligatory prerequisite, according to Polybius – for anyone wanting to pursue a political career. Moreover, during their service the *tribuni militum* had the opportunity to demonstrate their military skills and to establish personal relationships with Roman and Italian elites that could be useful in their future political careers.

The tribunate of the plebs was created as result of the so-called ‘Conflict of the Orders’ in the 5th century, but progressively became a potential stepping stone in the political career of plebeians. The office was usually held in the early stages of a political career, and the attitude and ideological orientation of a tribune could either promote him in the future or, on the contrary, block his advancement. Accordingly, the tribunate of the plebs offers a particularly worthwhile case study of how individuals managed their progression through the *cursus honorum*. In her chapter, Amy Russell focuses on how a politician’s behaviour as a tribune of the plebs could affect his future career success.

Roman expansion in the Mediterranean led to an increase in the number of magistrates – in particular, praetors – and to the extension of the practice

of promagistracy in order to cover the new military and administrative needs in the provinces of the empire: provincial administration and the consequent temporary absence from Rome thus potentially became part of a political career. Alejandro Díaz Fernández analyses in detail the impact of provincial commands on the *cursus honorum* with a view to determining how the creation of permanent overseas provinces influenced the adaptation and standardisation of the *cursus honorum*, the real impact of a higher magistrate's performance in his province on Roman public opinion, and the extent to which military success in the provinces had a direct, decisive impact on future elections.

Those holding magistracies gained life membership to the Senate, on which the following two chapters focus. In the post-Sullan *res publica*, the Senate automatically acquired each year twenty new members who had held the quaestorship. The pre-Sullan Senate was constructed, however, by the censors through their *lectio senatus*. As a result, the tenure of magistracies was decoupled from membership to the Senate through the mediation of the censors. Catherine Steel explores the impact of the *lectio senatus* on the enrolment of new senators, and, as a consequence, on the *cursus honorum* and the composition of the Senate itself. For her part, Cristina Rosillo-López focuses on the commissions tasked with drafting *senatus consulta* and on the *consilia* of magistrates in Rome as a means for young senators to gain prestige within the senatorial group. The main aim is to explore the extent to which the participation of young senators in those commissions and *consilia* indicated their political clout and provided them with visibility in intervals between offices.

Strictly speaking, military legates were never magistrates but this official post could affect the political careers of men climbing the first rungs of the *cursus honorum*. David Rafferty analyses the changing role of *legati* within a new command structure in the early 1st century, when multiple smaller armies operated separately and each one was commanded by a legate under the overall command of an *imperator* – for instance the legates who served under Pompey in the Mithridatic war in the 60s. The questions that need to be answered in this respect have to do with the effect that this change might have had on political careers and with how the different ancient sources treat this change at the level of mentalities.

The following chapters address the *cursus honorum* from very different perspectives: pursuing victory at all costs and accepting defeat; resignation and refraining from running for office; and the refusal of an office after being elected to it. Martin Jehne makes a comparison between election campaigns

and senatorial structures in the early 2nd century and in post-Sullan Rome. Whereas in the decades after the Hannibalic war a number of candidates were defeated in their first bid but ran again for office and sometimes were only successful after two or three further attempts, after Sulla's dictatorship many candidates abandoned their political careers after one *repulsa*. This poses the question of why this was so and whether it had anything to do with the cost of election campaigning at that time.

In competitive Republican Rome, where many candidates wanted to run for office at any price, refusing to do so was apparently an anomaly. Robinson Baudry focuses on the refusal to continue a political career beyond a certain rung of the *cursus honorum*, whether this be the quaestorship, tribunate of the plebs, aedileship or praetorship, in the last two centuries of the Roman Republic. This refusal could occur when a candidate took up what was judged to be the last office of his career, during the election campaign for the next office or after an election defeat.

There are many documented cases of consuls and praetors declining provincial governorships throughout the Republican period, especially during the 1st century. Indeed, the word *excusatio* is used in the Latin sources to refer to the act of presenting an excuse for not taking up office or for not accepting undertakings after being elected to a magistracy. Julie Bothorel discusses this procedure and the possible consequences for a political career, such as the pretexts that could be used to decline a provincial governorship, what happened to magistrates who did so and whether they could continue to pursue their *cursus honorum* without difficulties.

The last two chapters are devoted to the final years of the Republic and the transition to the Principate, respectively. In her chapter, Elisabetta Todisco analyses the praetorship in the last century of the Republic, in particular the political actions undertaken by praetors between 49 and 43, a time when Varro wrote his linguistic treatise *De lingua Latina* and his historical work *De vita populi Romani*. In that historical and intellectual context, an attempt is made to determine whether and to what extent the etymology of *praetor* proposed by Varro in both works was influenced by the behaviour and political role of the praetors during those years.

Lastly, Frédéric Hurlet focuses on the Augustan age as a period of experimentation, in which a new and much longer *cursus honorum* based on its Republican predecessor was created, but with a different structure. This process involved the introduction of new offices that were neither regular nor

had the same significance, as was the case with the multiplication of the offices reserved for *consulares*. These offices were no longer *honores*, as had been the case during the Republic, but *officia*, as Suetonius describes them (*Aug.* 37.1 and *Tib.* 42), more precisely *nova officia* to distinguish them from the traditional Republican magistracies.

This book contains contributions that were initially presented at the conference ‘*Cursus honorum*: Hierarchy, Prestige and *auctoritas* in the Roman Republic’, held in Zaragoza in the Museo Pablo Gargallo on 14-15 March 2024. The colloquium was sponsored by the Research Group Hiberus (Gobierno de Aragón) and the Institución Fernando el Católico (Diputación Provincial de Zaragoza). Both the conference and the book have been mainly funded by the project ‘*Vir consularis*: el papel político y social de los consulares en la Roma republicana y en la época augústea (219 a.C.-14 d.C.)’ (PID2020-112622GB-I00; Agencia Estatal de Investigación, Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación, Spanish Government). The Instituto de Patrimonio y Humanidades (Universidad de Zaragoza) has financially contributed to the publication of the book in open access.

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This volume addresses a crucial issue for the political culture of the Roman Republic: competition among individuals and families of the social elite. This rivalry came to head at the annual elections of new magistrates: every year, a number of candidates ran for office and whereas some obtained sufficient votes from the people, others were defeated. The political career of a Roman citizen therefore took the shape of a hierarchical ladder (*cursus honorum*) whose rungs corresponded to the age at which one or other magistracy was attained. The book deals with the position of the *cursus honorum* in Republican history, reflects on the way scholarship has constructed its political and social significance for the political culture of the period, and discusses questions relating to how Roman citizens pursued different political careers. The outcome is a groundbreaking and essential contribution to a better understanding of the Roman Republic.



Francisco Pina Polo

is Professor of Ancient History at the Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain). His publications include *The Role of Ex-Consuls in Republican Rome (218-31 BCE)* (2025), *The Quaestorship in the Roman Republic* (with Alejandro Díaz Fernández, 2019), *Foreign clientelae in the Roman Empire: A Reconsideration* (edited with Martin Jehne, 2015), and *The consul at Rome: The Civil Functions of the Consuls in the Roman Republic* (2011). He is currently Principal Investigator of the Research Group Hiberus.