

Transition from Republicanism to Imperialism

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May 19, 2014

Introduction

After the Third Punic War (149-146),¹ Rome could still claim to be a republic, i.e. a state in which power ultimately rests with the people or, in practice, their elected representatives. Moreover, the political institutions, including checks and balances to prevent appropriation and abuse of power, supported the continuation of this state of affairs.

At the time this status quo may have appeared to be stable, with magistrates generally serving a fixed period in office, thus limiting the scope for abuse. The Senate took care of things on a day to day basis, and the People occasionally had their say through votes and the power of the tribunes.² However, within a short time - relative to the duration of the Republic so far - Rome was to undergo a painful transition towards imperialism, beginning with seemingly harmless and occasional exceptions to the restrictions of office, through social and civil war, and ending with a single man holding absolute power.

This discussion will focus primarily on the individuals who gradually dismantled the republican system, particularly the checks and balances aimed at securing it in perpetuity. As part of this process they bypassed the Senate and made greater use of the military to serve their own ends. It is important to note that the transition to imperialism, and the corresponding move towards concentrating power in the hands of one man, is not the same as Rome moving from a republic to empire. Imperialism was arguably present well before the first emperor, Octavian (later Augustus), rose to power.

It would be possible to devote an entire discussion to each of the individuals and events described here, but we will take a general approach, favouring breadth over depth. In particular, we will focus on the specific occasions where the individuals bent or broke the usual rules regarding the separation of powers and *cursus honorum*, which will unfortunately mean skipping over some other areas. Those who wish to examine particular aspects in more detail are invited to consult the list of primary and secondary sources, which provides a starting point for further research into this time period.

Background

A key guiding principle of the Republic was the multiplicity of magistrates, intended to ensure that no man could have complete power. This was particularly the case when considering the most senior magistrates, the consuls.³ The appointment of two men to the position of consul meant that, in theory

¹All dates are BC unless otherwise indicated.

²In theory the Senate was predominantly a consultative body, but in practice it was the predominant power for most of the Republic.

³Technically the position of censor was the most senior role, as eligibility requirements for office included a previous consulship. However, censors had no imperium, and for the purposes of this discussion the consulship can be seen as the most senior magistracy.

at least, there was a balance of power, with each consul able to veto the actions of the other. Occasionally the two consuls might conspire with one another for mutual benefit, and two candidates might run on a joint ticket, but on the whole the system served Rome well for several centuries. The Senate could also appoint a dictator⁴ to take specific actions such as holding elections or defending Rome, but this was a rare move and in any event the appointment was usually for a short period (often six months), and the dictator was expected to resign without protest when the reason for their appointment had been satisfied. Even when a dictator was appointed, he was not necessarily free to do anything he wanted.⁵ No short-term dictators were appointed after 202.

We will now examine the consulship in more detail, as it is a key part of our discussion.

Consulship

In addition to the requirement for two consuls to provide a balance of power, there was also a minimum period - usually ten years - before an ex-consul could stand for re-election. Combined with the minimum age of 42 for election, these restrictions made it difficult for one man to legally gain the position of consul more than a handful of times. Whilst these restrictions were occasionally waived in exceptional circumstances,⁶ on the whole they were observed until the first century BC, and served their purpose of preventing one man from holding too much power.

So far we have identified four factors which limit the possibility of one man abusing the power of the consulship:

1. Actions were subject to veto by the other consul.
2. Fixed term of office - generally one year.
3. Minimum age of 42.
4. Gap of ten years between successive consulships.

Of course, individuals could exert power in other unofficial ways - such as using their wealth to fix elections through bribery and corruption - but this type of control was not as reliable as actually holding imperium.

As we shall see in later sections, these restrictions were gradually relaxed, and even ignored entirely, from 147 onwards.

Individuals

The transition from republicanism to imperialism was arguably brought about by the efforts of individual men taking greater and greater liberties with the rules governing the holding of power in Rome.

Gaius Marius (c. 157-86)

The first signs of a breakdown in the rules preventing an individual from seizing power can be seen through the actions of Marius. Born into a locally important but obscure family in Arpinium - a

⁴Like many words from this time period, the ancient use of 'dictator' differs from our modern usage.

⁵A dictator's actions may have been subject to veto by a tribune (Livy 27.6) and an appeal to the People (Livy 8.33).

⁶Scipio Aemilianus (grandson of Scipio Africanus) was elected consul in 147 at the age of 38, having not held other offices in the *cursus honorum*. However, he broadly supported the status quo and does not appear to have made any attempts to seize power.

small town north of Rome - Marius' beginnings did not provide the foundations which were seen as a requirement for a successful political career. Like Cicero, Marius was a *novus homo*, a 'new man', with none of his ancestors having achieved political office.

Instead of relying on the history and past achievements of his family, Marius used his military experience to slowly gain political power, with his first election as a military tribune due to his service under Scipio Aemilianus. He then advanced slowly up the *cursus honorum*, becoming quaestor, tribune of the plebs (120) and praetor (116). He finally reached the consulship in 107, and had yet to bend or break any of the rules regarding the magistracies. However, shortly after election as consul he embarked upon a package of reforms to the army which would influence his later career and those who followed him.

The Marian reforms were a key milestone in the transition, and thus require closer examination. They set a precedent for large scale recruitment of citizens too poor to pay for their own equipment, the *capite censi*, those 'counted by head' because they failed to meet the lowest wealth requirement.⁷ The lack of payment from the state, and their already humble beginnings, meant that these men looked to their commander for payment during service - often a share, albeit small, in the proceeds of war. Towards the end of a campaign, veterans would again look to their commander, this time for land to settle on. This left successful generals - of which Marius was clearly one - with a large number⁸ of loyal and experienced soldiers, who could be expected to back their former commander.

Having reformed the army, Marius embarked on a series of successful campaigns, first defeating Jugurtha in Numidia.⁹ Whilst in Africa, Marius started to bend the rules regarding elections, which would be followed by his predecessors. In 105 he was not only elected *in absentia* (i.e. without returning to Rome to stand in person), an unusual and possibly unprecedented move in itself, but also in breach of the rule requiring a ten year gap between successive terms of the same magistracy.¹⁰ He then went on to defeat two Germanic tribes - the Cimbri and the Teutones, securing successive consulships all the way to 100.

Marius' main failing, at least in a political sense, was to lack statesmanship to match his generalship. He left Saturninus to provide allotments for his veterans, a man who often used violence - as opposed to the gentle threat of force - to achieve his ends. Eventually in 99 he returned to sort out Saturninus and other troublemakers, but by this point he had lost the fear of the Senate and the respect of the People.

For several years little was heard of Marius, until his sudden return whilst Sulla was on campaign in Greece. Consumed by hate, he allowed his troops to rampage through the city, killing and looting as they went. Marius attained a seventh consulship in 86, but died a few days later.

Although ultimately unsuccessful in his personal attempts to retain power, Marius' reforms - and precedents set in ignoring the rules regarding the magistracies - allow later generals to bind large numbers of men to them through their reliance on their commander for payment during a campaign and allotment of land at its conclusion.

Lucius Cornelius Sulla (c. 138-78)

Sulla's military career began with his appointment as quaestor to Marius during the latter's first consulship. During this time, he made a name for himself within the army, and even managed to persuade Bocchus, king of the Numidians, to hand over the captured Jugurtha to the Romans. Whilst

⁷Whilst poorer citizens had been recruited into the army before, it was usually on a smaller scale.

⁸A typical legion of this period could contain over 5,000 fighting men at full strength, plus auxiliaries and support staff.

⁹Sulla was actually responsible for the capture of Jugurtha, but as Marius held imperium the honour belonged to him.

¹⁰There is also some evidence that second consulships were banned altogether by this point, making Marius' election an even greater breach of the rules.

Marius celebrated a triumph for this action, it still helped to lift Sulla from his previous obscure and insignificant background. Sulla continued to serve under the command of Marius, but shifted his loyalties when it became clear that Marius was deliberately hindering Sulla's advancement.

Returning to the political scene, Sulla failed to gain the praetorship in 98, but succeeded in being elected the next year.¹¹ After the Social War (91-88), Sulla was elected consul for the first time. However, after leaving Rome, Publius Sulpicius agreed to secure the transference of the command against Mithridates from Sulla to Marius, despite Sulla's credible record and Marius' advanced years (he was approaching seventy at the time). In response, Sulla took six legions and marched on Rome. Marius, Sulpicius and their associates were declared outlaws - Sulpicius was hunted down and killed but Marius escaped to Africa where many of his veterans were settled. Sulla then returned to the war against Mithridates.

In 83, Sulla once again returned to Italy with his legions, engaging in battle with Marian forces¹² which culminated in the battle of the Colline Gate, just outside Rome. Sulla emerged victorious, and the Senate took the unusual step of appointing him as dictator with no time limit on office, charging him with restoring the constitution. Sulla set to work with his infamous proscriptions, which resulted in the death of thousands of senators and equestrians and barred their male descendents from office.¹³ He then reorganised the constitution, removing the power of tribunes to veto acts of the Senate, increased the number of magistracies and codified the *cursus honorum*.

At this point Sulla surprised many by resigning his dictatorship and disbanding his legions. He was elected consul for 80, before retiring to the country and dying shortly afterwards.

In many ways, Sulla was a brief lurch back to republicanism. Whilst he dealt harshly with his enemies in the proscriptions, he does not appear to have attempted to seize power on a permanent basis, and effectively retired into obscurity.

Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (106-48)

In many ways the widest abuser of the *cursus honorum* was Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great).¹⁴ Pompey's father died when Pompey was only twenty, leaving his son with an inheritance of estates and the loyalty of his father's legions. As a rich equestrian, Pompey might have been expected to slowly climb the *cursus honorum* and become a senator, but instead he embarked on a military career soon after the death of his father.

Pompey's military career began with early success. In 83, still only in his early twenties, he raised three legions to support Sulla against Carbo in Greece. Sulla rewarded the young general by addressing Pompey as *imperator* and offering a political marriage to his stepdaughter. Pompey continued his campaign, securing Sicily in 82 and executing Carbo and his supporters, following up with successes in Africa. On his return to Rome he demanded, and received, a triumph, despite the fact that by law this honour could only be bestowed upon a consul or praetor, and Pompey was not even a senator.¹⁵

In 78, Pompey supported Marcus Aemilius Lepidus¹⁶ for the consulship, but switched sides when Lepidus attempted to gather allies and march on Rome. Once again, Pompey used his military success to request a further position, this time as proconsul to deal with the *populares* general Quintus

¹¹Plutarch alleges that this election was secured by concessions and bribery.

¹²Gaius Marius the Younger, son of the reformer, had been elected consul in 83.

¹³The proscriptions also conveniently resulted in mass seizures of property, which was auctioned off at preferential rates.

¹⁴The title of *magnus* was bestowed upon Pompey by Sulla, possibly intended as a sarcastic remark. Pompey did not use the title himself until later in his career.

¹⁵Plutarch, *Pompey* 14

¹⁶The father of the Marcus Aemilius Lepidus who was part of the Second Triumvirate

Sertorius in Spain. The Senate demurred, but changed their mind when Pompey used his tried and tested threat of refusing to disband his legions until his request was granted.

Slow but steady success in Spain eventually resulted in the entire province being subdued in early 71, and Pompey returned to Rome. On his return, he encountered the remains of Spartacus' army, capturing five thousand slaves and claiming the credit for finishing the revolt. Marcus Licinius Crassus had fought the bulk of the campaign and was furious with Pompey for taking the credit, but decided it was wiser to side with the successful young general than to oppose him. In 70, both Crassus and Pompey served as consul, despite the latter having held none of the required positions, being well under the minimum age and not even a senator.

We do not have much information for the time of Pompey's consulship, but two years afterwards the tribune Aulus Gabinius passed a law - *Lex Gabinia* - which provided Pompey with command of a substantial fleet and army to deal with the growing problem of pirates in the Mediterranean. Still only 39 years old, Pompey had managed to obtain a huge military command, as well as authority over provinces which fell within the 50-mile limit (at the time nearly all of Rome's provinces). Passed despite the opposition of the Senate, this law was yet another nail in the august body's coffin.

There is some argument over whether Pompey defeated the pirates or simply arranged a treaty or paid them off, regardless he was seen as a hero in Rome. He secured another command, this time in the East, engaging Rome's old enemy Mithridates. In 60, Crassus, Caesar and Pompey joined forces to form the First Triumvirate. Although theoretically an unofficial arrangement, the existence of the triumvirate was an open secret in Rome, and led to a further consulship for Pompey in 53.¹⁷

From this point on, however, Caesar's star begins to outshine that of Pompey, and what began as a concentration of power into the hands of three men gradually moved into one, beginning with the death of Crassus in 53 at the Battle of Carrhae. Pompey eventually met his end in Egypt, assassinated by people who felt Caesar would be pleased to see his adversary dead.¹⁸

Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44)

Born into an ancient patrician family whose political influence had waned over time, there was nothing particularly special about Caesar's upbringing, and little is known of his early childhood. Like Pompey, Caesar lost his father early in life and became head of his family, though the fact that Marius was his uncle caused problems for some time when Sulla returned to Rome. However, Caesar eventually gained a reprieve, much to Sulla's reluctance, and was free to begin his military career.¹⁹

Unlike Pompey, Caesar's early military and political career did not breach the rules of the *cursus honorum*, and he gained the quaestorship in 69, at the minimum age of 30. In 63 he ran for election as *pontifex maximus* (chief priest), a somewhat unusual career move with allegations of bribery levelled at all three candidates.²⁰ A term as praetor was followed by a position as governor of Spain.

Up until this point, Caesar's career appears to have been legitimate, if we overlook the allegations of bribery associated with his appointment as *pontifex maximus*. However, in 60 he made overtures to Crassus and Pompey which resulted in the formation of the First Triumvirate, whereby the three men would work together to effectively run the Republic. In the same year, Caesar was elected to the consulship, slightly below the minimum age. Together with armed men provided by Pompey, Caesar proposed a law to redistribute public lands to the poor, a clear attempt to gain popular support.

¹⁷Numerous sources attest senators visiting Caesar at Luca, including Plutarch, Appian and Suetonius.

¹⁸Contrary to what the assassins believed, Caesar was reported to be devastated to hear of Pompey's death.

¹⁹Sulla is reported to have said: 'the man whom you want me to spare [Caesar] will one day prove the ruin of the party which you and I have so long defended.' (Suetonius, *Caesar* 1.1)

²⁰We have no evidence for minimum qualifications for the position of *pontifex maximus*, so it is impossible to say whether Caesar's election was a breach of the rules.

Bibulus, the other consul for the year, attempted to halt proceedings by claiming the omens were unfavourable, but the principle of each consul acting as a check on the ambitions of the other had been eroded to the point where it could be ignored. Effectively Caesar acted as sole consul, leading later satirists to refer to the year as 'the consulship of Julius and Caesar'.

Towards the end of his consulship, and with the help of political allies, Caesar managed to obtain the governorship of Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul, despite the Senate's attempts to grant him a province with limited scope for military success. The term of his governorship - important as it brought immunity from prosecution - was set at five years, instead of the usual one. During this period, Caesar would obtain an extension of five years as a result of the First Triumvirate.

However, by 50 the Triumvirate had fallen apart due to various circumstances,²¹ and the Senate turned to Pompey to order Caesar to disband his army and return to Rome, his (extended) term as governor having expired. Caesar refused, crossed the Rubicon with one of his legions and in doing so ignited civil war in Italy.

After defeating Pompey, Caesar's final breaches of the rules regarding magistracies came in 46 and 45, where he was elected as consul in breach of the minimum term gap and, in his fourth consulship, without a colleague. He was also elected appointed dictator for ten years (later for life). As consul and dictator, with permanent tribunician powers on top, he was effectively emperor in all but name.

By the time of Caesar's assassination in 44, Rome had completed the transition from republicanism to imperialism - one man was now in charge. Augustus picked up where Caesar had left off, dispatching the one remaining challenger - Mark Antony - and becoming the first acknowledged emperor of Rome (and arguably played a much smarter game by making the Senate feel included, as opposed to Caesar's reliance on popular support).

Chronology

340 Imposition of ten year gap between successive terms of the same magistracy.

180 Lucius Villius (tribune) passes a law governing the minimum age for magistracies.

147 Scipio Aemilianus elected consul, contrary to the usual *cursus honorum* and before the minimum age.

107 First consulship of Marius.

104-100 Marius elected consul in five consecutive years, in breach of the ten year gap rule.

88 Sulla elected consul and granted command against Mithridates.

86 Marius elected consul for the seventh time.

83 Pompey raises three legions, despite having no authority to do so.

79 Pompey celebrates a triumph, despite not being a consul, praetor or even a senator.

78 Pompey granted proconsular imperium, after refusing to disband his legions.

71 Pompey celebrates a second triumph, again on dubious legal grounds.

70 First consulship of Pompey, contrary to the *cursus honorum* and before the minimum age.

59 Beginning of the First Triumvirate.

²¹Crassus was killed in battle in 53 and Pompey's wife (Caesar's daughter) had died in childbirth, severing the family ties.

59 First consulship of Caesar, consular colleague veto ignored.

54 First Triumvirate ends.

48 Death of Pompey in Pelusium.

44 Assassination of Julius Caesar.

Sources and further reading

We are fortunate that this time period is well documented, and many of the primary sources are still available to us. There is also a large corpus of secondary works

Primary sources

Our primary sources are split between Latin and Greek. For those unfamiliar with either language, translations are available in a variety of series. Penguin Classics and Oxford World's Classics are aimed at a broad audience, whereas the Loeb collection tends to be more academic and retains the original text alongside the translation.²²

Cicero Key figure, courted by all sides for his skills in oratory. Often advocated reconciliation and the continuation of the Republic, arguably beyond the point where this cause was lost.

Caesar First hand accounts of the Gallic and Civil Wars. Substantial detail on campaigns (e.g. logistics required to keep an army supplied) but hardly a neutral account.

Plutarch Biographies of all major individuals.

Sallust Account of the Jugurthine War, which introduces Marius and Sulla onto the political scene.

Livy Covers a wide range of topics for the period in question. Sometimes accused of being a storyteller rather than a historian, and can be overly patriotic.

Further reading

For those who wish to delve into this time period in more detail, some specific works are listed below:

From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome 133 BC to AD 68, H. H. Scullard. Standard undergraduate text for this period, written at a level which is accessible to those with an existing background understanding of the subject.

The Roman Republic, Michael Crawford. Slimmer and less academic alternative to Scullard.

The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire, Lawrence Keppie. Comprehensive coverage of the changes in the Roman army up to the early empire. Contains a chapter covering the Marian reforms.

Caesar, Adrian Goldsworthy. Substantial work on the most well-known Roman. Aimed at a broad audience but backed up with a substantial number of notes and research.

²²Take care with older editions, particularly in the Loeb collection. Some racier texts were subject to moral censorship in translation, which in some cases fundamentally altered the meaning.