

Lesson 1.2: The Constitution of the Republic

Learning Intentions

- To understand the structure and progression of the cursus honorum*
- To analyse the different Roman assemblies and their voting systems*
- To evaluate how constitutional safeguards both protected and ultimately failed the Republic*

Understanding the Content

The Cursus Honorum The cursus honorum ("course of offices") was the structured sequence of political offices that ambitious Romans followed. Each office had minimum age requirements, specific duties, and provided experience for higher positions. The system distributed power across multiple officials and prevented rapid accumulation of authority.

Key Constitutional Principles:

- **Collegiality** → Most offices had at least two holders who could veto each other
- **Annual tenure** → One-year terms prevented entrenchment of power
- **Imperium** → Supreme command authority held by senior magistrates
- **Intercessio** → Power of veto, especially important for tribunes
- **Provocatio** → Citizens' right to appeal magistrates' decisions

The Ladder of Offices

Office	Age/Requirements	Number	Key Powers	Significance
Quaestor	Age 30	20	Financial administration, treasury	Entry to Senate, first step in career
Aedile	Age 36	4	Public works, games, markets	Optional but useful for popularity
Praetor	Age 39	8		
Consul	Age 42	2		
Censor	Ex-consul	2 (every 5 years)		

Special Offices

Office	Nature	Key Powers	Dangers
Dictator	Emergency appointment (6 months max)	Absolute authority, no appeal	
Tribune of the Plebs	Separate plebeian office	Veto power, sacrosanct power	

Roman Assemblies

Where power resided

Unlike modern democracies, Rome had multiple assemblies with different memberships and functions. Each assembly represented a different aspect of Roman society - wealth, geography, or class. The system appeared democratic but was structured to preserve elite influence. Complete the table below to understand how each assembly functioned and who it favoured.

Assembly	Membership	Organisation	Key functions	Bias toward
Senate	Ex-magistrates (~300)	Not voting body	Advisory (but powerful through auctoritas)	Aristocratic experience
Cenuriate Assembly	All citizens	193 centuries by wealth		
Tribal Assembly	All citizens	35 tribes by geography		
Concilium Plebis	Plebeians only	35 tribes		

Exercise 1.1: Understanding the Cursus Honorum

1. Why was the quaestorship essential for a political career?
2. What made the consulship the "pinnacle" of a normal political career?
3. How did the principle of collegiality act as a safeguard against tyranny?
4. Why might ambitious politicians skip the aedileship? Why might others eagerly seek it?
5. Explain how the dictatorship could both save and destroy the Republic.

Exercise 1.2: Analysing the Assemblies

1. The Centuriate Assembly divided citizens into 193 centuries, with the wealthy controlling 98. What does this reveal about Roman "democracy"?
2. Why was the Concilium Plebis potentially the most radical assembly?
3. How could the Senate dominate policy when it technically had no legal power, only "auctoritas"?
4. "Roman assemblies could only vote yes or no on proposals from magistrates." What are the implications of this restriction?

Exercise 1.3: Source Analysis

1. "The constitution of the Romans is not simple... it is a combination of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy" - Polybius 6.11
 - Identify which institutions represented each element
 - Why might this "mixed constitution" be considered superior?
2. "The tribunician power is the fortress of liberty" - Tacitus, Annals 3.27
 - What specific powers made tribunes so important?
 - How could this "fortress" be turned against the Republic?