

Cursus Honorum

The central political power in Rome was the senate. It was hierarchically organised. The decisions made by the senate were effectively decided only by those senators who had previously held the highest offices as well as the biggest number of offices. So it was the ambition of a young Roman to get as far on the Cursus Honorum, the prescribed sequential order of public offices, as possible.

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The seat of power: The senate

The central political power in Rome was the senate.



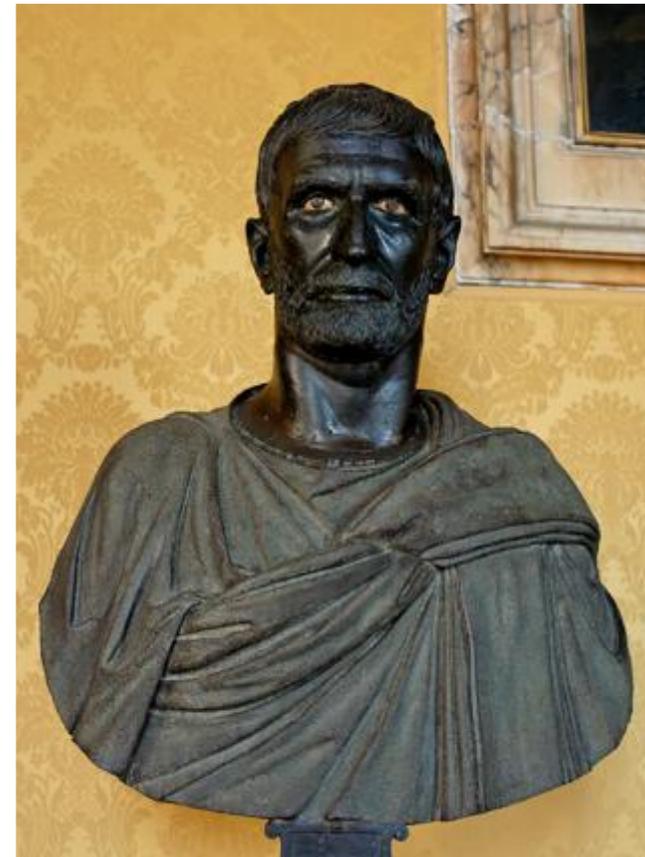
View of the Roman Forum, Rome. Photo: BeBo86 / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

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Rome's legendary first consul

Allegedly, it was Lucius Iunius Brutus who founded the senate. According to legend, he dethroned Rome's last king in 510 BC. In the aftermath, the Roman Republic was proclaimed and the state power transferred to the magistrates. As the story goes, the Romans elected Brutus to be their first consul because they deeply admired him. However, this rendering of history is not supportable in view of more recent scholarship.



So-called Brutus on modern bust. Musei Capitolini, Rome. Photo: Wikicommons / Jastrow.

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The attributes of power

Still, this coin here depicts him as consul in full official attire, framed by lictors carrying the fasces. The accensus, a kind of crier, leads the procession and clears the way for the consul.



Denarius of M. Iunius Brutus, 54. Obverse: Libertas. Reverse: First consul Lucius Iunius Brutus, surrounded by his lictors.

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The state is the senate

The senate had such a long-standing tradition that the common people regarded it as the embodiment of state power and, accordingly, treated it with considerable respect. This close relationship finds expression in the established initialism SPQR, *senatus populusque romanus*, which, in translation, means 'The senate and people of Rome'.



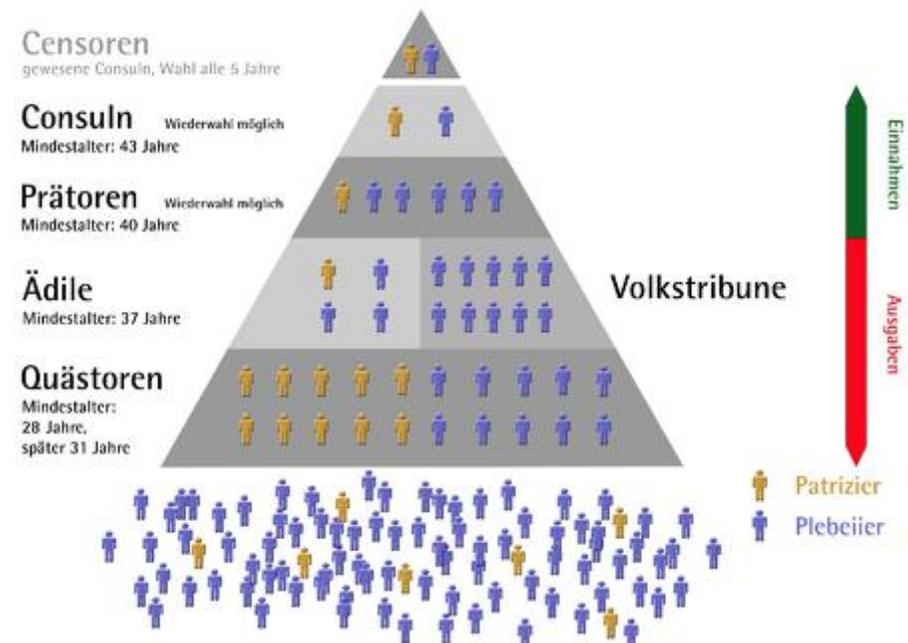
The abbreviation is even today ubiquitous in Rome. Source: Wikicommons / Philippe Remacle/shizhao; <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

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To the top

In theory, the possibility to begin a political career with the office of quaestor was open to every Roman. Once you climbed higher on the ladder of success, the available positions became scarcer. The first obstacle, however, were the financial costs: To win the electorate's favour and increase chances on an election victory, candidates spent enormous sums of money. It took many years before those who had made it to the office of praetor could even begin to hope that their power as policymaker in Rome or governor of a province would eventually enable them to pay off their debts. The system was practically predetermined to force ambitious men into abusing their office and exploiting their subjects.



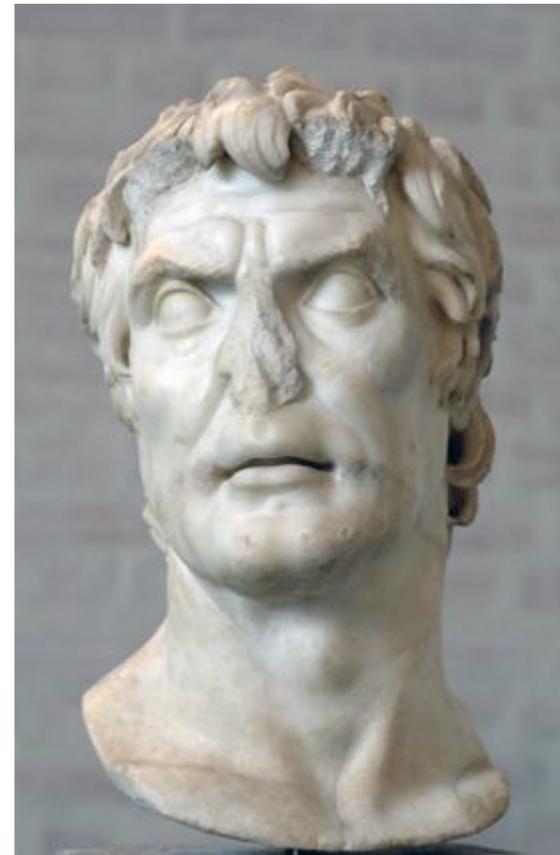
Office pyramid of the Cursus Honorum.

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Regulating the path of honour

A highly explosive political subject was the question how promotion to higher offices could be earned. In this context, dictator Sulla established the Cursus Honorum in 81 BC. This regulation strictly prescribed the order in which political offices could be held.



Effigy of an anonymous person, usually identified with Sulla. Glyptothek, Munich. Photo: Wikicommons / Bibi Saint-Pol.

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Financial ruin or success

This turned out to be a serious problem for all those young men who had invested a lot of money to reach the lower ranks, but then failed to be promoted to higher ranks, which was practically the only way to earn the invested money back. Catiline was one of these men. Twice he missed the chance to be elected consul. The political failure meant his financial ruin. Social decline was imminent. Perhaps the only reason behind Catiline conspiracy, made famous by Cicero's speech.



Cicero denouncing Catiline. Historicising fresco by Cesare Maccari, 1888.

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Games for the people

The first hurdle was being elected aedile or tribune plebis, tribune of the people. Of the 20 quaestors, 10 men from a Plebeian background could rise to the position of tribune, four of Patrician descent to the rank of aedile. As shown on this coin, tribunes sat on the subsellium, the bench on the rostra, when executing their office. The warship rams, which gave the rostra – as the speaker's platform was called in ancient Rome – its name (rostrum = warship ram), are clearly recognisable below.



Denarius of Lollius Palikanus, 45. Obverse: Libertas. Reverse: Subsellium above rostra, seat of the tribune.

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The insignia of power

Out of 20 quaestors, not more than two made it to the office of consul. In fact, chances were even worse because prominent politicians prided themselves with holding the office more than one term. *Sella curulis* (curule seat) and *fascēs* (bundle of wooden rods) were the perfect symbols to promote yourself by referring to the fact that one of your ancestors had once held a prestigious political office.



Denarius of L. Furius Brocchus, 63. Obverse: Ceres. Reverse: Curule seat and fasces of a magistrate.

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Power is visible

Outside the sacred boundary of the city of Rome, lictors also carried axes inside the fasces. They served as reminder that, in the state of war, consuls had the right to have even Roman citizens executed.



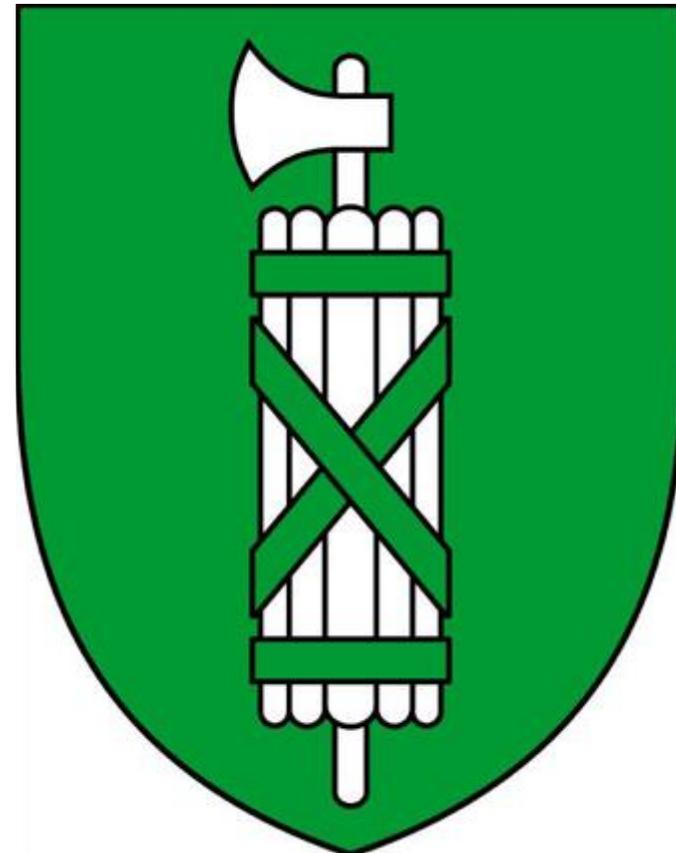
Drawing of a lictor from Cesare Vecellio's (1521–1601) 'Habiti antichi et moderni'. Source: Wikicommons / Shiono Nanami.

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Strength in unity

The ancient Roman fasces (bundle of wooden rods) have been used since then until the modern times. Not only Napoleon made use of them but also the followers of Benito Mussolini.



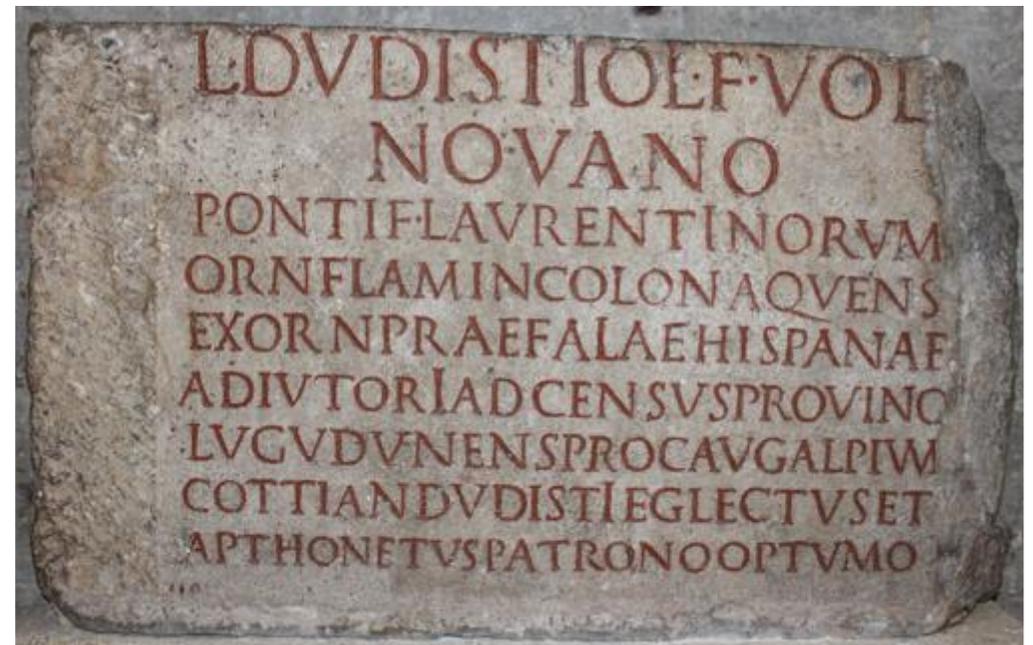
Coat of arms of the Suisse Canton of St Gallen (official coat of arms since 2011). Source: Wikicommons.

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L. Dudistius Novanus for instance

Although, technically, priesthood was not among the offices of the Cursus Honorum, it was a highly prestigious office and could definitely advance an official's career. This inscription for instance reveals that Roman cavalier Lucius Dudistius Novanus had not only served as procurator of the Cottian Alps, but also as flamen.



Roman inscription from the Roman city of Massilia (modern-day Marseille). Musée Calvet, Avignon. Photo: Wikicommons / Rossignol Benoît / <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.de>

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No mon, no fun

Only the wealthiest Roman citizens could afford a political career as the inferior offices of the Cursus Honorum were not rewarded financially. A young candidate running for one of the offices needed to use his money strategically. One possibility for a candidate was taking on a priestly office and, in this function, entertaining the Roman people royally. Those who had made it far enough to be aediles could ingratiate themselves with the people by generously topping up the budget of the games, which they were responsible for, with private funds.



Pollice Verso by Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1872. Phoenix Art Museum. Photo: Wikicommons / phxart.org.