

The Early Roman Dictatorship: A Dangerous Institution?

According to sources that coalesced in the Late Republic, the period of the Samnite Wars (343-290 BCE) was seminal in the history of Roman expansion in Italy in the Middle Republic. Although our understanding of this period is lacunose to say the least, a simple glance at the geography of the conflict's putative territorial gains through military campaign and colonial settlement demonstrates that the framework for Rome's domination of the southern peninsula was formed during this period. On the one hand, the events presented in later sources occurred nearly a century before the Romans began to record their own history in narrative form, and such useful epigraphic information as the consular *fasti* were surely subjected to interpolation by later hands. On the other hand, there is equally good reason to expect that later sources at least preserved the salient details of genuine historical events recounted in the Roman historiographical tradition that began at the end of the third century BCE. It is plausible, for example, that there is basic veracity in lists of priests and prodigies, wars and diplomatic affairs, promulgation of laws, and magistrates, even allowing for later editing.

Following this premise, numerous issues emerge from our picture of the drawn out Second Samnite War, fought in the last quarter of the fourth century BCE. Among the most striking features of the period is the use of the dictatorship. According to the *fasti* and later literary portrayals, in twenty-three years of conflict the Roman senate authorized the appointment of fourteen dictators. If we impose periodization on years of more or less intense military activity, these figures point to a more concentrated use of the dictatorship during this war than in any fixed stretch in the history of the Roman Republic, before or after. Concurrently, the appearance of a dictator on average every eighteen months during the conflict runs counter to

the practice we might expect for an institution that late sources maintained was a dangerous recourse reserved for military emergencies and equipped with an extreme form of *imperium maius*. Livy, for example, emphasizes the severity of the dictator's authority in the phrase *imperium sua vi vehemens* (2.30.4), while Dionysius likens the later form of the dictatorship to a τυραννίς (*Ant. Rom.* 5.73.1-2). Although the figures cited above *in se* merit further explanation even without consideration of ancillary material found in later literary depictions, they have not received sufficient attention from Roman historians.

The aim of this paper is to sketch out the aforementioned use of the dictatorship during the Second Samnite War in order to understand what it may imply about this institution and Roman magistracy more broadly in the Middle Republic. I proceed on three levels. First, I contextualize the frequent use of the dictatorship during the war along with the concomitant *causae* (the reason for appointment that accompanied the entry of each dictator in the consular *fasti*) within the obvious methodological difficulties in interpreting events which occurred long before the inception of a historiographical tradition. Second, in order to create a manageable case-study for this paper, I focus on the period 316-312 BCE, a five-year stretch during which five consecutive dictators were appointed, and analyze the competences and activities of each dictator, using as a guide *causae* and material recorded by later Latin historiographical accounts. Third, I show that this analysis of the dictatorship in the Middle Republic, and specifically in the Second Samnite War, reveals a far more complex picture of the office than traditional scholarly models hold. Contrary to what is generally assumed about this office from a retrospective point of view, I propose that the dictatorship, before its disappearance at the end of the third century BCE, effectively functioned as a third, ad hoc consulship intended to supplement rather than subvert the sitting consuls.

Bibliography

- Bandel, F. 1987, reprint (First Edition 1910). *Die römischen Diktaturen*. Naples.
- Drummond, A. 1978. 'The Dictator Years.' *Historia* 27: 550-572.
- Keyes, C. 1917. 'The Constitution Position of the Roman Dictatorship.' *Studies in Philology* 14: 298-305.
- Linderski, J. 1990. 'The Auspices and the Struggle of the Orders.' *Staat und Staatlichkeit in der frühen römischen Republik*. Ed. W. Eder. Stuttgart, 34-48.
- Pina Polo, F. 2011. *The Consul at Rome: The Civil Functions of the Consuls in the Roman Republic*. Cambridge.
- Ridley, R. 1979. 'The Origin of the Roman Dictatorship: An Overlooked Opinion.' *RhM* 122: 303-309.
- Rosenberg, A. 1913. *Der Staat der alten Italiker*. Berlin.
- Soltau, W. 1914. 'Der Ursprung der Diktatur.' *Hermes* 49: 352-368.
- Staveley, E. 1955. 'Provocatio during the Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.' *Historia* 3: 412-428.
- _____. 1963. 'The 'Fasces' and 'Imperium Maius.'" *Historia* 12: 458-484.
- Stewart, R. 1998. *Public Office in Early Rome: Ritual Procedure and Political Practice*. Ann Arbor.