

Sulla and the nature of the classical dictatorship

- (1) Cicero recalls Sulla's dictatorship in a trial speech of 70 BC:

There has been one man only in all the history of Rome – may the gods grant there may never be another – into whose hands our country, overcome by internal danger and calamity, surrendered itself without reserve. So great was the power of Lucius Sulla that no man was safe, if he willed otherwise, from poverty, from exile, from death.

Cicero, *Against Verres*, 2.3.81

- (2) Dionysius of Halicarnassus compares Sulla and Titus Larcus, the first dictator at Rome:

But in the time of our fathers, a full four hundred years after the dictatorship of Titus Larcus, the institution became an object of reproach and hatred to all men under Lucius Cornelius Sulla, the first and only dictator who exercised his power with harshness and cruelty; so that the Romans then perceived for the first time what they had all along been ignorant of, that the dictatorship is a tyranny

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 5.77.4-5

- (3) Dionysius of Halicarnassus on the etymology of the name 'dictator':

Larcus was the first man to be appointed sole ruler at Rome with absolute authority in war, in peace, and in all other matters. They call this magistrate a dictator, either from his power of issuing whatever orders he wishes and of prescribing for the others rules of justice and right as he thinks proper (for the Romans call commands and ordinances respecting what is right and wrong *edicta* or 'edicts') or, as some write, from the form of nomination which was then introduced, since he was to receive the magistracy not from the people, according to ancestral usage, but by the appointment of one man.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 5.72.1

- (4) Dionysius of Halicarnassus on the dictator's trappings of power:

After that, desiring to show how great was the extent of his power, he ordered the lictors, more to inspire terror than for any actual use, to carry the axes with the bundles of rods through the city, thereby reviving once more a custom that had been observed by the kings but abandoned by the consuls after Valerius Publicola in his first consulship had lessened the hatred felt for that magistracy. Having by this and the other symbols of royal power terrified the turbulent and the seditious, he first ordered all the Romans, pursuant to the best of all the practices established by Servius Tullius, the most democratic of the kings, to return valuations of their property, each in their respective tribes, adding the names of their wives and children as well as the ages of themselves and their children.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 5.75.2-3

- (5) Cincinnatus appointed dictator in 458 BC:

The sole hope of the empire of the Roman People, Lucius Quinctius, cultivated a field of some four acres across the Tiber, now known as the Quinctian Meadows, directly opposite the place where the naval dockyards are at present. There he was found by the representatives of the state. Whether bending over his spade as he dug a ditch, or ploughing, he was, at all events, as everybody agrees, intent upon some rustic task. After they had exchanged greetings with him, they asked him to put on his toga, to hear ... the mandates of the senate. In amazement he cried, 'Is all well?' and bade his wife Racilia quickly fetch out his toga from the hut. When he had put it on, after wiping off the dust and sweat, and came forth to the envoys, they hailed him dictator, congratulated him, and summoned him to the city, explaining the alarming situation of the army.

Livy 3.26.8-11

(5) Cincinnatus appointed dictator in 458 BC:

It chanced that Quintius was on his occasion engaged in some agricultural work; and seeing the approaching throng and suspecting that they were coming after him, he put on more becoming apparel and went to meet them. When he drew near, they brought to him horses decked with magnificent trappings, placed beside him twenty-four axes with the rods and presented to him the purple robe and the other insignia with which aforetime the kingly office had been adorned. Quintius, when he learned that he had been appointed dictator, far from being pleased at receiving so great an honour, was actually troubled, and said: 'This year's crop too will be ruined, then, because of my official duties, and we shall all go dreadfully hungry'.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 10.24.1-2

(6) Cincinnatus abdicates on the 16th day of his dictatorship:

And when the senate wanted him to accept as much of the conquered land as he wished, together with slaves and money out of the spoils, and to relieve his poverty with deserved riches which he had acquired most honourably from the enemy by his own toils, he refused to do so. Also when his friends and relations offered him magnificent gifts and placed their greatest happiness in assisting such a man, he thanked them for their zeal, but would accept none of their presents. Instead, he retired again to that small farm of his and resumed his life of a farmer working his own land in preference to the life of a king, glorying more in his poverty than others in their riches.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 10.25.3

(7) Cincinnatus appointed dictator for the second time, 439 BC:

There was need, he continued, of a man, and one who was not only brave, but free and unfettered by the laws. He would therefore name Lucius Quinctius dictator; there was a spirit whose stature was equal to that great power. Despite the universal approval of this step, Quinctius at first refused, and asked what they meant by exposing him at the end of his life to so fierce a struggle. Then, when men called out on every side that there was not only more wisdom but more courage in that old man's heart than in all the rest and loaded him with not unmerited compliments, and when the consul would not recede from his purpose, at length Cincinnatus uttered a prayer to the immortal gods that they would not suffer his old age to bring harm or shame to the republic in so perilous a case, and was pronounced dictator by the consul.

Livy 4.13.11-14

(8) Camillus resolves the 'Struggle of the Orders' as dictator in 367 BC:

Camillus, perplexed at the issue, did not renounce his office, but taking the senators with him, marched off to their place of meeting. Before he entered this, turning to the Capitol, he prayed to the gods to bring the present tumults to their happiest end, solemnly vowing to build a temple to Concord when the confusion was over.... On the next day they held an assembly and voted to build a temple of Concord, as Camillus had vowed, and to have it face the Forum and the Senate House, to commemorate what had now happened.

Plutarch, *Life of Camillus*, 42

(9) Cicero describes the circumstances for the appointment of a dictator:

But when a serious war or civil dissensions arise, one man shall hold, for not longer than six months, the power which ordinarily belongs to the two consuls, if the Senate shall so decree. And after being appointed by favourable auspices, he shall be 'master of the people'. He shall have an assistant to command the cavalry, whose rank shall be equal to that of the praetor.

Cicero, *Laws*, 3.9

(10) Appian describes the genesis of the Sullan dictatorship, November 82 BC:

But Sulla communicated to Flaccus by letter that he should present his opinion to the people that Sulla considered it beneficial under the present circumstances that the city should be under the office called the dictatorship, which for the past 400 years had fallen out of use. Whomsoever they should choose, he ordered that he should hold office not for a fixed period of time, but until he should restore order to the city, Italy and the entire empire, shaken by civil strife and wars. It seemed clear that this opinion referred to Sulla himself, and in this there was no ambiguity. Sulla did not conceal his intention and revealed at the end of the letter that he felt that he himself was most suited to serve the city in this matter.

(Appian, *Civil War*, 1.98)

(11) Appian describes Sulla's abdication from the dictatorship, around July 81 BC:

He dismissed the lictors with their axes and discontinued his bodyguard, and for a long time walked around the forum with only a few friends, the multitude looking upon him with awe even then. On his way home he was reviled by a child who had scarcely reached boyhood. As nobody restrained this boy he made bold to follow Sulla to his house, railing at him; and Sulla, who had opposed the greatest men and cities with towering rage, endured his reproaches with calmness, and as he went into the house said, divining the future either by his intelligence or by chance, 'This young man will prevent any future holder of such power from laying it down'.

(Appian, *Civil War*, 1.104)

(12) Plutarch compares Sulla with the Spartan general Lysander:

Moreover, the acts of injustice which one wrought were in behalf of his friends; while the other's extended to his friends. For it is generally agreed that Lysander committed the most of his transgressions for the sake of his comrades, and that most of his massacres were perpetrated to maintain their power and sovereignty; but Sulla cut down the number of Pompey's soldiers out of jealousy, and tried to take away from Dolabella the naval command which he had given him, and when Lucretius Afella sued for the consulship as a reward for many great services, ordered him to be slain before his eyes, causing all men to regard him with fear and horror because of his murdering his dearest friends.

(Plutarch, *Comparison of Lysander and Sulla*, 2.3-4)

(13) Plutarch describes Sulla's opposition to Pompey's triumph, March 81 BC:

After this Pompey asked for a triumph, but Sulla opposed his request. The law, he said, permitted only a consul or a praetor to celebrate a triumph, but no one else.... Pompey, however, was not cowed, but bade Sulla reflect that more worshipped the rising than the setting sun, intimating that his own power was on the increase, while that of Sulla was on the wane and fading away. Sulla did not hear the words distinctly, but seeing, from their looks and gestures, that those who did hear them were amazed, he asked what it was that had been said. When he learned what it was, he was astounded at the boldness of Pompey, and cried out twice in succession: 'Let him triumph!'

(Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 14.1-3)

The Roman Dictators, 501-44 BC

M – supreme military command (*rei gerundae causa*)

E – hold elections (*comitiorum habendorum causa*)

S – counter sedition, secession of plebs/refusal to enlist, mutiny, conspiracies, allied unrest

L – lawgiving

C – revise senatorial lists, function of the censors

R – religious function, e.g. celebrate/establish festivals, or conduct priestly rites such as affixing sacred nails to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol (*clavi figendi causa*)

D – ‘dictator years’, apparently no consuls appointed

F – faulty appointment, immediate abdication

Year	Fn.	Dictator	Master of Horse
501	M	T. Larcus / ? M'. Valerius M.f. Volesi n.	Sp. Cassius Vecellinus
499	M	A. Postumius P.f. – n. Albus Regillensis	T. Aebutius T.f. – n. Helva
498	M?	? T. Larcus – f. – n. Flavius (or Rufus)	
494	S	M'. Valerius Volesi f. – n. Maximus	Q. Servilius – f. – n. Priscus Structus
458	M	L. Quinctius L.f. L.n. Cincinnatus	L. Tarquinius L.f. Flaccus
439	S	L. Quinctius L.f. L.n. Cincinnatus	C. Servilius – f. – n. Ahala
437	M	Mam. Aemilius M.f. – n. Mamercinus	L. Quinctius L.f. L.n. Cincinnatus
435	M	Q. Servilius P.f. Sp.n. Priscus Fidenas	Postumius Aebutius –f. –n. Helva Cornicen
434	M	Mam. Aemilius M.f. – n. Mamercinus	A. Postumius –f. –n. Tubertus
431	M	A. Postumius –f. –n. Tubertus	L. Iulius (Vopisci f. C.?n.) Iullus
426	M	Mam. Aemilius M.f. – n. Mamercinus	A. Cornelius M.f. L.n. Cossus
418	M	Q. Servilius P.f. Sp.n. Priscus Fidenas	C. Servilius Q.f. C.n. Axilla
408	M	P. Cornelius M.f. L.n. Rutilus Cossus	C. Servilius P.f. Q.n. Ahala
396	M	M. Furius L.f. Sp.n. Camillus	P. Cornelius P.f. M.n. Maluginensis
390	M	M. Furius L.f. Sp.n. Camillus	L. Valerius Poplicola / or Potitus
389	M	M. Furius L.f. Sp.n. Camillus	C. Servilius –f. –n. Ahala
385	M	A. Cornelius –f. –n. Cossus	T. Quinctius Capitolinus
380	M	T. Quinctius T.f. L.n. Cincinnatus Capitolinus	A. Sempronius –f. –n. Atratinus
368	M/S	M. Furius L.f. Sp.n. Camillus	L. Aemilius (L.f. Mam.n.) Mamercinus
	M/S	P. Manlius A.f. A.n. Capitolinus	C. Licinius C.f. P.n. Calvus
367	M	M. Furius L.f. Sp.n. Camillus	T. Quinctius –f. –n. Cincinnatus Capitolinus Or: T. Quinctius –f. –n. Poenus
363	R	L. Manlius A.f. A.n. Capitolinus Imperiosus	L. Pinarius –f. –n. Natta
362	M	Ap. Claudius P.f. Ap.n. Crassus Inregillensis	----- –f. –n. Sca.u.la
361	M	T. Quinctius –f. –n. Poenus Capitolinus	Ser. Cornelius P.f. M.n. Maluginensis
360	M	Q. Servilius Q.f. Q.n. Ahala	T. Quinctius –f. –n. Poenus Capitolinus
358	M	C. Sulpicius M.f. Q.n. Peticus	M. Valerius L.f. L.n. Poplicola
356	M	C. Marcus L.f. C.n. Rutilus (<i>first plebeian</i>)	C. Plautius P.f. P.n. Proculus
353	M	T. Manlius L.f. A.n. Imperiosus Torquatus	A. Cornelius P.f. A.n. Cossus Arvina
352	M/E	C. Iulius (-f. –n. Iullus?)	L. Aemilius (L.f. Mam.n. Mamerc[in]us)
351	E	M. Fabius N.f. M.n. Ambustus	Q. Servilius Q.f. Q.n. Ahala
350	E	L. Furius M.f. L.n. Camillus	P. Cornelius (P.f. –n.) Scipio
349	E	T. Manlius L.f. A.n. Imperiosus Torquatus	A. Cornelius P.f. A.n. Cossus Arvina
345	M	L. Furius M.f. L.n. Camillus Or: L. Furius Sp.f. M.n. Camillus	Cn. Manlius L.f. A.n. Capitolinus Imperiosus
344	R	P. Valerius P.? f. L.? n. Poplicola	Q. Fabius –f. –n. Ambustus
342	S	M. Valerius M.f. M.n. Corvus	L. Aemilius (L.f. L.n. Mamercinus Privernas)
340	M	L. Papirius L.f. L.n. Crassus	L. Papirius Sp.f. L.n. Cursor
339	L	Q. Publilius Q.f. Q.n. Philo	D. Iunius –f. –n. Brutus Scaeva
337	F	C. Claudius (Ap.f. P.n. Crassus) Inregillensis	C. Claudius –f. –n. Hortator
335	E	L. Aemilius L.f. L.n. Mamercinus (Privernas)	Q. Publilius Q.f. Q.n. Philo
334	F	P. Cornelius –f. –n. Rufinus	M. Antonius –f. –n.
333	F/D	P. Cornelius –f. –n. Rufinus	M. Antonius –f. –n.
332	M	M. Papirius –f. –n. Crassus	P. Valerius –f. –n. Poplicola
331	R	Cn. Quinctius T.f. T.n. Capitolinus	C. Valerius Potitus or: L. Valerius Flaccus
327	E/F	M. Claudius C.f. C.n. Marcellus	Sp. Postumius –f. –n. Albinus (Caudinus)

325	M	L. Papirius Sp.f. L.n. Cursor	Q. Fabius M.f. N.n. Maximus Rullianus
324	D	L. Papirius Sp.f. L.n. Cursor	Q. Fabius M.f. N.n. Maximus Rullianus
322	M/R	A. Cornelius P.f. A.n. Cossus Arvina	M. Fabius N.f. M.n. Ambustus
321	E	Q. Fabius –f. –n. Ambustus	P. Aelius –f. –n. Paetus
320	E	M. Aemilius –f. –n. Papus	L. Valerius –f. –n. Flaccus
	M	C. Maenius P.f. P.n.	M. Folius C.f. M.n. Flaccinator
	M	L. Cornelius –f. –n. Lentulus	L. Papirius Sp.f. L.n. Cursor
	E?	T. Manlius L.f. A.n. Imperiosus Torquatus	L. Papirius Sp.f. L.n. Cursor
316	M	L. Aemilius L.f. L.n. Mamercinus Privernas	L. Fulvius L.f. L.n. Curvus
315	M	Q. Fabius M.f. N.n. Maximus Rullianus	Q. Aulius Q.f. Ai.n. Cerretanus
314	S	C. Maenius P.f. P.n.	C. Fabius M.f. N.n. Ambustus (suff.)
313	M	C. Poetelius C.f. C.n. Libo Visolus	M. Folius C.f. M.n. Flaccinator
	M	Q. Fabius (M.f. N.n. Maximus Rullianus)	M. Folius (C.f. M.n. Flaccinator)
312	M	C. Sulpicius Ser.f. Q.n. Longus	M. Poetelius M.f. M.n. Libo
310	M	L. Papirius Sp.f. L.n. Cursor	C. Iunius C.f. C.n. Bubulcus Brutus
309	D	L. Papirius Sp.f. L.n. Cursor	C. Iunius C.f. C.n. Bubulcus Brutus
306	E	P. Cornelius –f. –n. Scipio Barbatus	P. Decius P.f. Q.n. Mus
302	M	C. Iunius C.f. C.n. Bubulcus Brutus	M. Titinius C.f. C.n.
	M	M. Valerius M.f. M.n. Maximus Corvus	Q. Fabius M.f. N.n. Maximus Rullianus
301			M. Aemilius L.f. L.n. Paullus
	D	M. Valerius M.f. M.n. Maximus Corvus	Q. Fabius M.f. N.n. Maximus Rullianus
			M. Aemilius L.f. L.n. Paullus
287	S/L	Q. Hortensius –f. –n.	unknown
285	?	? M. Aemilius Q.f. L.n. Barbula	unknown
	?	? Ap. Claudius C.f. Ap.n. Caecus	
	?	? P. Cornelius Cn.f. P.n. Rufinus	
280	E	Cn. Domitius Cn.f. Cn.n. Calvinus Maximus	unknown
263	R	Cn. Fulvius Cn.f. Cn.n. Maximus Centumalus	Q. Marcius Q.f. Q.n. Philippus
257	R	Q. Ogulnius L.f. A.n. Gallus	M. Laetorius M.f. M.n. Plancianus
249	?	M. Claudius C.f. Glicia	none
	M	A. Atilius A.f. C.n. Caiatinus (<i>1st out of Italy</i>)	L. Caecilius L.f. C.n. Metellus
246	E	Ti. Coruncanus Ti.f. Ti.n.	M. Fulvius Q.f. M.n. Flaccus
231	E	C. Duilius M.f. M.n.	C. Aurelius L.f. C.n. Cotta
224	E	L. Caecilius L.f. C.n. Metellus	N. Fabius M.f. M.n. Buteo
221		? Q. Fabius Q.f. Q.n. Maximus Verrucosus	C. Flaminius C.f. L.n.
217	M	Q. Fabius Q.f. Q.n. Maximus Verrucosus	M. Minucius C.f. C.n. Rufus
	M	M. Minucius C.f. C.n. Rufus (co-dictator)	
	E	L. Veturius L.f. Post.n. Philo	M. Pomponius M'.f. M'.? n. Matho
216	M	M. Iunius D.f. D.n. Pera	Ti. Sempronius Ti.f. Ti.n. Gracchus
	C	M. Fabius M.f. M.n. Buteo	none
213	E	C. Claudius Ap.f. C.n. Centho	Q. Fulvius M.f. M.n. Flaccus
210	E	Q. Fulvius M.f. M.n. Flaccus	P. Licinius P.f. P.n. Crassus Dives
208	E/R	T. Manlius T.f. T.n. Torquatus	C. Servilius C.f. P.n. (Geminus)
207	E	M. Livius M.f. M.n. Salinator	C. Caecilius L.f. L.n. Metellus
205	E	Q. Caecilius L.f. L.n. Metellus	L. Veturius L.f. L.n. Philo
203	E/S	P. Sulpicius Ser.f. P.n. Galba Maximus	M. Servilius C.f. P.n. Pulex Geminus
202	E/R	C. Servilius C.f. P.n. (Geminus)	P. Aelius Q.f. P.n. Paetus
82-1	L	L. Cornelius Sulla	L. Valerius Flaccus
52	L	Cn. Pompeius Magnus – sole consul	
49	L	C. Iulius C.f. C.n. Caesar	None
48-47		C. Iulius C.f. C.n. Caesar (<i>for one year</i>)	M. Antonius M.f. M.n.
46-45		C. Iulius C.f. C.n. Caesar (<i>for 10 years</i>)	M. Aemilius M.f. Q.n. Lepidus
		And consul in 46, and part of 45	
45-44		C. Iulius C.f. C.n. Caesar	M. Aemilius M.f. Q.n. Lepidus
44		C. Iulius C.f. C.n. Caesar (<i>dictator perpetuus</i>)	M. Aemilius M.f. Q.n. Lepidus
		And consul in 44 with M. Antonius M.f. M.n.	Designate: C. Octavius C.f. C.n. (Augustus)
			Designate: Cn. Domitius M.f. M.n. Calvinus
22	L	Augustus: commission for morals and laws	