

From Village to Empire: an Introduction to the History of Rome

Lecture 4: The Conflict of the Orders

Important terms

domi militiaeque ('at home and abroad [at war]')

Patricians

Plebeians (*plebs* – note that this word is *singular*; the plural form is *plebes*)

nexum ('debt enslavement')

The first secession of the *plebs*

Livy 2.32.1-33.3: Thereupon the senators became alarmed, fearing that if the army should be disbanded there would again be secret gatherings and conspiracies. And so, although the levy had been held by order of the dictator [a magistrate appointed in times of emergency; he held office alone, but could only do so for a maximum of 6 months; he was helped by a 'master of the horse', a *magister equitum*], yet because the men had been sworn in by the consuls they regarded the troops as bound by their oath, and, under the pretext that the Aequi [a neighbouring people] had recommenced hostilities, gave orders to lead the legions out of the city. This brought the revolt to a head. At first, it is said, there was talk of killing the consuls, that men might thus be freed from their oath; but when it was explained to them that no sacred obligation could be dissolved by a crime, they took the advice of one Sicinius, and without orders from the consuls withdrew to the Sacred Mount, which is situated across the river Anio, three miles from the city. This version of the story is more general than that given by [L. Calpurnius] Piso [who wrote a history of Rome in the late second century BC], namely that the Aventine [hill] was the place of their secession. [continues...]

The first secession of the *plebs*

There, without any leader, they fortified their camp with stockade and trench, and continued quietly, taking nothing but what they required for their subsistence, for several days, neither receiving provocation nor giving any. There was a great panic in the city, and mutual apprehension caused the suspension of all activities. The plebeians, having been abandoned by their friends, feared violence at the hands of the senators; the senators feared the plebeians who were left behind in Rome, being uncertain whether they had rather they stayed or went. Besides, how long would the seceding multitude continue peacefully? What would happen next if some foreign war should break out in the interim? Assuredly no hope was left save in harmony amongst the citizens, and this they concluded they must restore to the state by fair means or foul. They therefore decided to send as an ambassador to the commons Menenius Agrippa, an eloquent man and dear to the plebeians as being one of themselves by birth. [continues...]

The first secession of the *plebs*

On being admitted to the camp he is said merely to have related the following apologue, in the quaint and uncouth style of that age: In the days when man's members did not all agree amongst themselves, as is now the case, but had each its own ideas and a voice of its own, the other parts thought it unfair that they should have the worry and the trouble and the labour of providing everything for the belly, while the belly remained quietly in their midst with nothing to do but to enjoy the good things which they bestowed upon it; they therefore conspired together that the hands should carry no food to the mouth, nor the mouth accept anything that was given it, nor the teeth grind up what they received. While they sought in this angry spirit to starve the belly into submission, the members themselves and the whole body were reduced to the utmost weakness. Hence it had become clear that even the belly had no idle task to perform, and was no more nourished than it nourished the rest, by giving out to all parts of the body that by which we live and thrive, when it has been divided equally amongst the veins and is enriched with digested food – that is, the blood. [continues...]

The first secession of the *plebs*

Drawing a parallel from this to show how like was the internal dissension of the bodily members to the anger of the plebs against the Fathers, he prevailed upon the minds of his hearers.

[33] Steps were then taken towards harmony, and a compromise was effected on these terms: **the plebeians were to have magistrates of their own, who should be inviolable, and in them should lie the right to aid the people against the consuls, nor should any senator be permitted to take this magistracy.**

And so they chose two '**tribunes of the people**,' Gaius Licinius and Lucius Albinus. These appointed three others to be their colleagues. Amongst the latter, Sicinius, the promoter of the revolt, was one, as all agree; the identity of the other two is less certain. Some hold that there were only two tribunes elected on the Sacred Mount, and that the law of inviolability was enacted there.

Important terms and events

sacrosanct

veto ('I forbid')

concilium plebis ('the council of the *plebs*')

lex ('law'; the plural form is *leges*)

lex Publilia (471 BC) ('the law proposed by Publilius')

plebiscites (resolutions of the *concilium plebis*)

lex Hortensia (287 BC) ('the law proposed by Hortensius')

Further terms and events

C. Terentilius Harsa

decemviri ('board of 10 men'; 450 and 449 BC)

lex Canuleia (445 BC)

The Valerio-Horatian Laws (449 BC)

military tribunes with consular power (also known as 'consular tribunes')

C. Licinius and L. Sextius

Licinio-Sextian laws (367 BC)

The Licinio-Sextian bill (377 BC)

Livy 6.35.4-5: Once elected, C. Licinius and L. Sextius proposed only such measures as abated the influence of the patricians, while forwarding the interests of the plebs. [1] One of these had to do with debt, providing that what had been paid as interest should be deducted from the original sum, and the remainder discharged in three annual instalments of equal size. [2] A second set a limit on lands, prohibiting anyone from holding more than 500 *iugera* [*presumably*, of public land]. [3] A third did away with the election of military tribunes [with consular power], and [4] prescribed that of the consuls one, at any rate, should be chosen from the plebs.

Further events

366 first plebeian consul (L. Sextius)

356 first plebeian dictator (C. Marcius Rutilus)

351 first plebeian censor (C. Marcius Rutilus)

337 first plebeian praetor (Q. Publilius Philo)

342 *leges Genuciae* ('the laws proposed by L. Genucius')

339 *leges Publiliae* ('the laws proposed by Q. Publilius Philo')

The *lex Ogulnia* (300 BC)

Livy 10.6.6: The Ogulnii [the brothers Quintus Ogulnius and Gnaeus Ogulnius] proposed a bill, that whereas there were then four augurs and four pontiffs and it was desired to augment the number of priests, four pontiffs and five augurs should be added, and should all be taken from the plebs.

Relevant reading

Brunt, P. A. (1971), *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic*, London.

Cornell, T. J. (1995), *The Beginnings of Rome*, London.

Drummond, A. (1989), 'Rome in the fifth century I: the social and economic framework', in F. W. Walbank, *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume VII part 2, second edition, Cambridge, 113-171.

Drummond, A. (1989), 'Rome in the fifth century II: the citizen community', in F. W. Walbank, *et al.*, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, volume VII part 2, second edition, Cambridge, 172-242.

Lintott, A. (1999), *The Constitution of the Roman Republic*, Oxford.

Raaflaub, K., ed., (2005), *Social Struggles in Archaic Rome: New Perspectives on the Conflict of the Orders*, second edition, Oxford.