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## The Consular Year



"If there is discord among the wisest men, can it astonish us that the civil years, which were established by less accomplished persons, differed one from the other and corresponded but badly with the natural years?"

Censorinus, *De Die Natale* (VIII)

With the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus, the last Etruscan king, and the establishment of the Roman Republic in 509 BC (245 AUC), supreme power (*imperium*) resided in two consuls, who were elected annually. From 222 BC they assumed office on March 15 (the Ides of March), just before the vernal equinox. (Prior to that year, consuls assumed and left office depending upon the exigencies of the moment.) It was spring, and March, named after Mars, the god of war, was the start of the military campaign season. In 153 BC, however, consuls began to assume power on January 1 (the Kalends of January), which now marked the beginning of the consular or civil year as well as the calendar year--although, even when the year had begun in March, it is likely that the first crescent moon after the winter solstice, when light begins to increase over darkness, marked its natural beginning.

Why the consular year began on January 1 was due to the Second Celtiberian War. In 154 BC, there was rebellion in Spain. Quintus Fulvius Nobilior was designated consul for the following year but could not assume office until the Ides of March. Given the military situation, the Senate decreed January 1 to be the start of the new civil year, which permitted Nobilior to be inducted and depart with his legions that much sooner.

He still was delayed in arriving, however, as can be determined by a severe defeat late in August, a loss so disastrous that the day on which it occurred was declared a *dies ater* and subsequently was considered unlucky. Indeed, Appian relates that no Roman general would willingly initiate a battle on that day. (July 18, 390 BC, when the Gauls defeated Rome in the Battle of the Allia was another "black day.")

Even after Varro had posited the traditional founding of Rome (April 21, 753 BC, in the third year of the sixth Olympiad) as an historical point from which subsequent years could be counted, Romans dated past events, not from the foundation of the city (*ab urbe condita*, abbreviated AUC), which was not agreed upon in any event, but by the consular year as designated by the names of those then in office. The assassination of Julius Caesar occurred, not in 710 AUC (44 BC), but in the fifth year of his consulship and the first year of Mark Antony's. This eponymity continued until Justinian I abolished the consulship in AD 541/542. It now was to be held by the emperor alone and dating to be by the regnal year. The consular record (*fasti consulares*), which had been recorded from the beginning of the Republic, had come to an end.

The relative chronology of the consular year, however, still had to be synchronized to some incident in the past whereby Romans could orient themselves in time. Polybius had the same need to establish an absolute point in the chronology of *The Histories*. "The starting-point must be an era generally agreed upon and recognized, and one self-apparent from the events...For if there is any ignorance or indeed any dispute as to what are the facts from which the work opens, it is impossible that what follows should meet with acceptance or credence" (I.5.4-5). For Rome, that event was the sack of the city by the Gauls (Polybius, I.6.2), traditionally dated to 390 BC.

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The *fasti consulares* likely is not complete (or, prior to about 300 BC, even reliable), either because some years did not have consuls, or they are not recorded or are interpolations. The traditional date given by Varro for the sack of Rome, for example, (and for several other events in the early history of Rome) is skewed by several years when calculated from Greek historians. Rome, in fact, was sacked in 387/386 BC, which was "the nineteenth year after the battle of Aegospotami and the sixteenth before that of Leuctra, the year in which the Spartans ratified the peace known as that of Antalcidas with the King of Persia, that in which also Dionysius the Elder, after defeating the Italiot Greeks in the battle at the river Elleporos, was besieging Rhegium, and that in which the Gauls, after taking Rome itself by assault, occupied the whole of that city except the Capitol" (Polybius, I.6.1-2; also Diodorus Siculus, XIV.113).

The first attempt to synchronize the events of Roman history with those of the Greeks does not take place until the time of Cicero (mid-50s BC) when his friend Cornelius Nepos wrote a lost *Chronica*, about which Catullus speaks in his dedication. "To you, Cornelius...you alone of Italians, to set forth the whole history of the world in three volumes, learned volumes, by Jupiter, and laboriously wrought" (I.5-7). Nepos used as a reference point the foundation of Rome, which, following Polybius, he fixed at the second year of the seventh Olympiad (751 BC). (One begins to appreciate the problem when reminded that, to count from the foundation of the city is to do so from April 21, not March 15 or January 1, and that the Olympian year ran from midsummer to midsummer.)

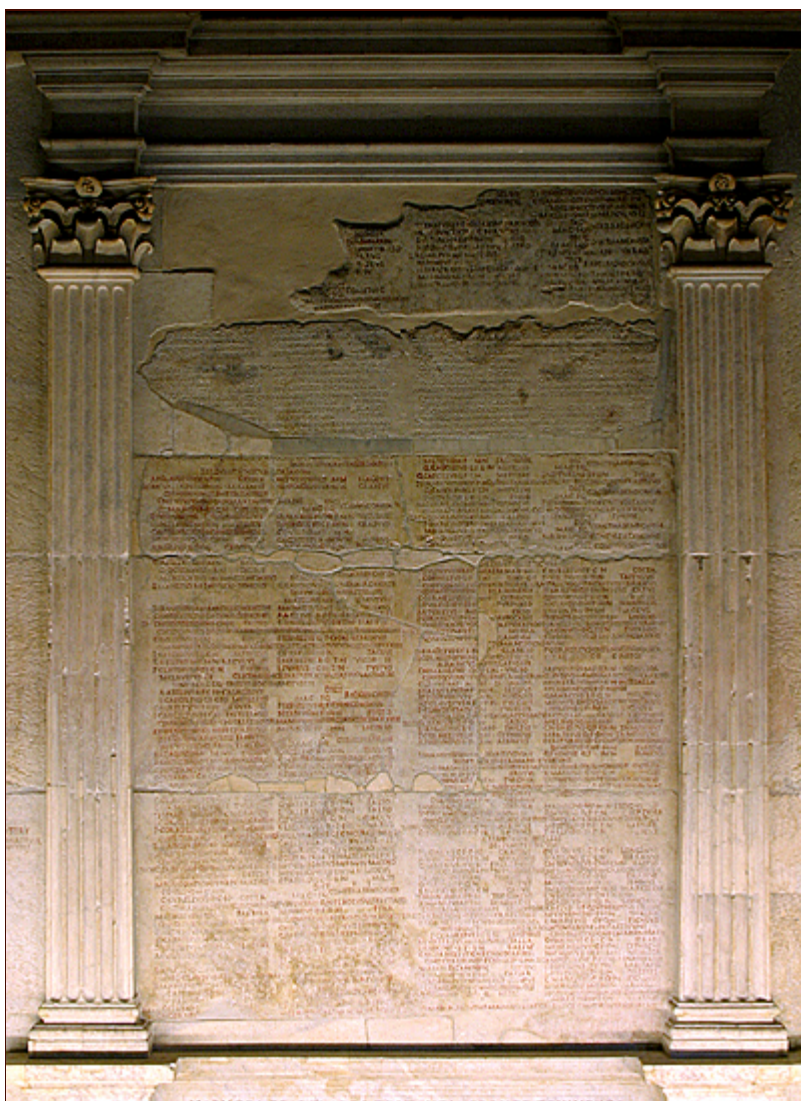
Too, by the time that Justinian ended the consulship, the title had become honorary, with no real duties other than to scatter gold coins among the people and pay for



public spectacles. These personal expenses were increasingly ruinous, so much so that in AD 535 and 536 there were no consuls at all. In AD 537 Justinian was obliged to limit the expenses of the office by law (*Novel* 105).

Discovered in the mid-sixteenth century and now in the Palazzo dei Conservatori (Rome), the *Fasti Capitolini Consulares et Triumphales* list the consuls from 483 to 19 BC and triumphators from 753 BC. Originally, it may have decorated the Arch of Augustus, which was erected in 19 BC to celebrate the return of the standards that had been captured from Crassus by the Parthians at Carrhae (Dio, LIV.8.1-3). Or it may have adorned the Regia, near where the *fasti* were found.

In the detail above, the *Bellum Philippicum* (Second Macedonia War), which began in 200 BC, is noted in the center of the first line. Then the two consuls for that year are named. On line eight, Marcus Porcius Cato and Lucius Valerius Flaccus are listed (195 BC); on the next line, Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus and Tiberius Sempronius Longus (194 BC). Then, slightly indented, are the names of the censors and the number of times (XXXXVII) the *lustrum* had occurred (the purification rite performed every five years after the census). On the next line, in the left-hand margin, the number DLX is inscribed, that is, the 560th year since the foundation of Rome (193 BC, which in the *Fasti* is calculated from 752 BC).



Feeney argues that, by adding the number of years from the founding of Rome to the consular *fasti*, Augustus subtly but profoundly altered how civil time was apprehended. The list of consular eponyms begins to lose its significance in reckoning time and, instead of identifying the year, the importance of their succession devolves simply to a place in a larger chronology. Although the consular year still was in place, by the end of Augustus' reign, its symbolic importance has been completely reimagined.

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**Reference:** *Caesar's Calendar* (2007) by Denis Feeney.

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AELIUS\_STILO@YAHOO.COM