

The Aristocracy, the People, and the Beginnings of the *cursus honorum*

Roman aristocratic careers were not subject to a strict systematization during the fourth and third centuries B.C. The *cursus honorum* that stipulated the succession of aedileship, praetorship, and consulship, as well as minimum ages for seeking and attaining these magistracies, was not established by law until 180 B.C. When a standardized career path was finally brought about, different degrees of hierarchy within the aristocracy emerged. The new *cursus* also provided a point of reference for the interaction between the senatorial rank and the *populus*. The origins of the *cursus honorum* have never been fully examined, nor have its consequences for the exercise of aristocratic power been recognized. My paper aims to fill this gap. It will consider the conditions necessary for a systematization of public careers, the struggle for a *cursus*-law after the Second Punic War, and the effects of standardized career patterns on Roman political culture. Doing so, it will contribute to the on-going debate on the composition of the Republican elite and its strategies of securing its social status as well as to the current discussion on the Roman democracy triggered by Fergus Millar.

Competition for public offices always was a competition for status, since public office-holding was the indisputable criterion that defined the aristocracy. In the era of the Punic Wars, the increase in the number of magistracies (praetors 1 to 4, quaestors 4 to 8) caused a continuous shift in the parameters of that competition, while also making it more fierce. Prosopography and statistics elucidate that during that era candidates from consular families increasingly outdid candidates of non-consular descent. The secret behind their success was their outstanding “symbolic capital” (Pierre Bourdieu). In the course of the third century B.C., the aristocracy gradually turned into a closed rank, which became more and more inaccessible to new members.

The Second Punic War changed that. Due to the high death rate among the aristocracy, many new families were admitted to the senate. The following two decades witnessed several attempts to standardize the *cursus* through so-called *leges annales*. Livy reports that those efforts caused a good deal of turmoil, without presenting details on the persons or groups involved. It will be demonstrated that the major resistance against the *leges annales* came from the most renowned aristocratic families, since any such legislation would have limited the weight of their symbolic capital. Support for the law of 180 B.C. is very likely to have derived from families of lower aristocratic rank, many of whom had just entered the senate. They had a vital interest in legal criteria for the *cursus*, since they enabled a greater degree of social mobility. The *cursus honorum* now became the core principle of a close network of political and social hierarchies, both within the aristocracy and between that status group and the people. This leads to the concluding aspect of my paper. It will be argued that the new *cursus* helped to stabilize the relations between the aristocracy and the people, because it provided a set of comprehensive--and neutral, as it were--rules for the exercise of aristocratic power. In turn, that exercise became more acceptable to the people.