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The Origin of the Roman Office of Consul

While the Roman exile of King Tarquin provided a revolution that birthed the office of consul, multiple factors were behind its creation. One factor was the distrust and disdain the people of Rome had for the Tarquin family. A second factor is the favor that Lucius Junius Brutus gained from the gods and his disposition that gave him the opportunity to lead the Roman people into freedom because of their love of piety. A final factor is the relationship and connections between the consul and kingship as well as the distinct virtues that Lucius Junius Brutus intertwined into the office, including piety, fidelity to the law, and the protection of the Roman people.

When Romulus combined the Sabine rule of Tatius with the rule of the Roman people after the battle with the Sabines, the kingship first began to resemble the office of consul. This was the first instance of shared governance in the highest office of the republic, symbolizing how two rulers, as opposed to one, best achieve peace and protect the freedom of the people. Having two rulers allows for the balance of power. By establishing the precedent of two kings, Romulus establishes his dominance over Tatius because he bestowed the kingship on the Sabine after defeating them in battle. While it was necessary for Romulus to kill his brother Remus for the sake of founding the republic, the perpetuation of a republic requires shared governance. One ruler cannot overpower the other because they are equals in the office they hold. Romulus established a precedent that Lucius Junius Brutus would make manifest after rallying the people to exile the Tarquin family. Romulus understood that when the political society was unstable, two leaders could work better to solve issues and combat faction.

Another advantage to the office of consul is the role it plays in checking the other offices in the republic. The office of consul can act as an arbiter between factionist parties that are

jeopardizing the republic. Take for example in Book II of Livy's *History of Rome*, when the plebeians refused to enlist in the draft for fear of losing their farms. Publius Servilius checked the power of the senate and the people by mediating the dispute between the two. Livy explains, "there Servilius declared that the senators were concerned to consult the interests of the plebs; fear for the entire state had taken precedence over their deliberations about what was, indeed, the greatest part of the citizen body, but nevertheless only a part" (II.24). The plebeians wanted to keep their farms, and the Senate wanted to keep their army functioning. The office of consul acted as a check against the people to prevent them from harming the whole city by refusing to enlist in the war.

The consul also acted as check against the senate from disenfranchising the farmers by establishing that their property could not be revoked during war. Servilius presented to the plebeians and senate the middle ground that both parties were missing because they were trying to be judges in their own cause. There must be an impartial office that advocates for solutions that achieve the most for the good of city or else factional disputes between offices can stifle the city and cause it great harm. One man who provided the position of consul with great skill was Lucius Junius Brutus, who used his intelligence to effectively combat tyranny and empower the Roman people to exile the Tarquin family.

Lucius Junius Brutus used his brains to feign ignorance to protect himself from the tyrant Tarquin. He was the nephew of the king, and understood that he needed to distance himself so that he would not become a pawn used by Tarquin. Livy writes that Brutus was "a young man of far different character from what he pretended to be" (I.56) because "he deliberately put on an act of being stupid" (I.56). Brutus understood how dangerous his uncle was and did not want to fall victim to him. Assuming a false persona as a fool, Brutus was not viewed as threat to Tarquin, and this protected him from his tyranny. Brutus' persona was effective because of the values of the

Roman republic. People valued one's reputation over all, and Brutus used this to his advantage. Romanism is what one appears to be rather than what one actually is. The appearance of a delightful idiot that Brutus would embody to disguise his natural talents truly represents his restraint and brilliance that would later be manifested in his role as revolutionary leader and consul.

Brutus gained favor with the gods after interpreting the oracle of Delphi. He accompanied Tarquin's sons Titus and Arruns on their excursion to obtain a message from the Pythia. The message the oracle gave was "[w]hoever of you shall be the first to kiss his mother will hold the highest power in Rome." (I.56). Brutus, unbeknownst to the brothers, understood that the oracle's meaning of mother had a wider interpretation, "pretending to slip, he fell and touched the earth with his lips, evidently regarding her as the mother of all mortals" (I.56). While Brutus does not believe in the words of the oracle, he absolutely believes in the power that they bring, and so by fulfilling the oracle, Brutus would hold the highest office in Rome. This gave Brutus the confidence to lead the revolution against the monarchy. He gained this confidence because of the reliance the Romans had on the gods and obtaining their favor. An individual's connection to the gods of the city ensured one's success and prosperity.

The Roman people desired a leader who emulated Numa and Servius Tullius, and they found that leader in Lucius Junius Brutus. Brutus was the instigator of the revolution and led the charge with the people to exile the Tarquin family. The people had come to disdain Tarquin family for numerous reasons. He forced them into public labor and his family caused havoc in Rome. However, the exhausting labor that Tarquin forced upon the Romans showed the people a sense of their own power and what they could accomplish. The people had tangible projects, like the cloaca maxima and circus maximus, that made life in Rome better and more enjoyable for all. This fostered toughness and honor among the public workers that gave them a sense of pride to be a

Roman citizen. Brutus also understood the power that the people possessed, and would use that power to lead the people to freedom from the tyrannical monarchy and become the first consul elected.

Brutus channeled the rage and power of the people towards the goal of exiling the Tarquins after the rape and suicide of Lucretia. Sextus Tarquinius's horrific act should at a minimum result in exile, but Brutus used this opportunity to rid Rome of the tyrannical family that was undermining the ethics of the city and infringing on the people's freedom. The rape of Lucretia was the final straw for the Roman people, and they simply needed a leader to help them achieve greater political freedom.

Brutus was extremely persuasive to the people. Livy highlights this after Brutus avenges the death of Lucretia, "they were moved not only by the father's grief but also by Brutus, who reprimanded them for their tears and idle complaints, urging them, as befit men and Romans, to take up arms against those who had dared such acts of hostility" (I.59). He wasted no time in rallying the people and channeling their passions and anger as a prime opportunity to revolt against the Tarquin family and replace the monarchy with an office that could protect the values of the city and freedom of the people. Brutus seized his opportunity to showcase his natural talent as a leader and lead the Roman people to true freedom.

The consul was an office that required a devotion to the laws over any ties to family or friends. Brutus demonstrates this in the role of consul, in Book II of Livy's *History*, by executing the conspirators, even when these conspirators were his only sons. Brutus executes his sons to uphold the laws of Rome. This act shows his true capacity as a leader to sacrifice his lineage for the sake of the republic. Livy explains the tone of the execution, "the consul's sons drew the eyes of all away from the others who became, as it were, anonymous. Men felt grief as much for the

crime for which the youths were being deservedly punished as for the punishment itself” (II.5). Fidelity to the law must rank supreme over personal connections to people. If Brutus did not execute his sons, his act of nepotism would undermine the newly established office of consul and jeopardize the stability of the republic. Brutus made the difficult, yet necessary decision to kill his sons because he viewed Rome as more important than his own family. This shows Brutus’ complete dedication to the laws and the success of the Roman republic.

Another act to stabilize the freshly established office of consul was the decision to replace Lucius Tarquinius Collatus with Publius Valerius Publicola because of his relation to the Tarquin family. The Roman people were absolutely terrified of the entire Tarquin family and the violence and danger they brought to the city. Livy writes about the thoughts of the Roman people expressed by Brutus: “[t]he Roman people, he continued did not believe that they had recovered absolute freedom. The royal family and the royal name were not only present in the state, but also in power” (II.2). Having any descendent of the Tarquin family involved in any capacity of political office, let alone holding the office of consul, was completely incompatible with the people’s view of absolute freedom. Lucius Tarquinius Collatus was replaced by Publius Valerius Publicola, who like Brutus, was present at the suicide of Lucretia. The office of consul represented the newly found freedom of the Roman people and they could not trust a Tarquin in an office that sacred.

The office of consul allowed the Roman people to regain their freedom. Its origins can be traced back Romulus when he combined his rule with the Sabine king Tatiush to create political stability and combat factions. The first consul, Brutus, had an extreme devotion to the laws of Rome, even going so far as to execute his sons, and only offspring, for conspiring against the republic. This emphasized the role that consuls play in protecting the common good of Rome. The office of consul ensured that the Roman people could have better protection of their freedom,

equality under the law, and mediator between the other offices and people to ensure that no sect of the government overpowered or undermined another. Lucius Junius Brutus set the precedent that the office of consul is for the betterment of the people and in turn the Roman republic, with an emphasis on preserving the value of the republic that the foundational kings set forth.

Work Cited

Titus Livy, *The History of Rome*, trans. Valerie M. Warrior (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006).