

# Archives in the Roman Republic

Anne-Marie Schwirthich

Australian Archives

The history of archives administration is not a subject that has tempted many writers. Research and analysis confined to archives in antiquity is particularly elusive.<sup>1</sup>

The paucity of literature relating to the area reflects the general lack of interest within the circle of ancient historians in the subject<sup>2</sup>, the possibility that few archivists are ancient historians and the inherent difficulties in grappling with the extant evidence.

The evidence available for any enquiry into the records generated and maintained in Roman antiquity is insubstantial and scattered.<sup>3</sup> The extant literacy sources fall into the following general categories: histories, for example those of Livy and Tacitus; biographies, for example those by Plutarch and Suetonius; literary works, such as those of Virgil and Horace; political orations, such as Cicero's; and correspondence, such as Cicero's and the Younger Pliny's.

If someone were attempting to write an exposition of archives in Australia from the time of colonial settlement to the present with the assistance only of, say, Manning Clark's, *A History of Australia*, F. Crowley's, *A New History of Australia*, L. A. Meredith's, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales*, Robert Menzies' collected speeches and correspondence, Patrick White's novels, Gough Whitlam's, *The Truth of the Matter* and perhaps a random assortment of plaques and inscriptions, the problems encountered would be comparable.

Archaeological evidence remains invaluable in documenting aspects of the archival history of Rome, however, even the most scrupulous and exacting sifting of all the available evidence would not render it possible to discuss in a coherent or comprehensive manner the development or maintenance of archives in the Roman Republic or Empire.

It is possible to establish the form of records maintained, some of the repositories in use can be identified, we can speculate as to the sorts of public records generated and their administrative purpose. However, it is not possible to isolate or identify precisely who looked after the records, nor the details of how they were acquired, controlled, stored, retrieved, accessed and appraised.

An attenuated chronological scheme of Roman history and a cursory introduction to the major political offices is provided to aid the appreciation of the complexity of Roman political life, its institutions and hence its records.

### Chronology

Fact and legend are inextricably linked in the accounts of the establishment of early Rome which provide Romans with Trojan antecedents through Aeneas and the founding of the city (at varying dates between 814 and 729 B.C.) to his descendants, Romulus and Remus. However, it is certain that early Rome was governed by kings who were advised by the Senate, a council of elders composed of representatives of the leading clans enjoying political and religious privileges. The People, plebeians, formed a distinct and disadvantaged segment of society.

In 510 B.C. an aristocratic Republic was established upon the expulsion of the Tarquinius Superbus. Two annually elected magistrates, later accorded the title consuls, were invested with the powers of state.

The sharp distinction between plebeian and patrician Roman citizens and the subsequent tension and hostility led to the evolution of the legal system and the incorporation of plebeian officers into the magisterial system of the Republic. The final century of the Republic's span (133-31 B.C.) was marked by severe political discontent, misgovernment, civil war and the foundering of the constitution.

In 31 B.C., having defeated the Antonine forces and annexed Egypt, Augustus created, within the Republican framework, a new political system with himself as *princeps* (the first or foremost). It was, in fact, a constitutional monarchy which endured, with less and less constitutionality, after his death until the third century A.D. when Diocletian divided the Empire and the imperial power. The civil wars that erupted after Diocletian's retirement were ultimately quelled by Constantine who by 330 A.D. had established a new capital Byzantium formally marking the end of Roman power and influence.

### Government

The establishment of the Roman Republic, accepted traditionally to date from the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus, took the form of the annual election of two eponymous magistrates originally named praetors but who later assumed the title consuls. These magistrates were invested with supreme executive authority (*imperium*) and constituted the executive head of the state. They possessed full military *imperium* and exercised supreme criminal and civil jurisdiction. The magistracy suffered some diminution of its powers, and some of its functions were transferred to other magistrates, however, the office itself remained intact well into the Empire.

The Senate was a council which had advised the monarchy and which survived the transition to the Republic. Senators were at first chosen by the consuls, later by the censors. The Senate existed, formally, to advise the magistrates in matters of domestic and foreign policy, finance, religion and on their legislative proposals. It also suggested the nomination of a dictator and assigned various duties to the magistrates, determined the rate of the tribute, supervised revenue and expenditure and controlled the *aerarium* (treasury).

The Senate deliberated in private, but with opened doors. The urban quaestors kept the Senate's records in the *aerarium*. There was no publication of official reports of senatorial proceedings until Caesar ordered these in the *acta rerum urbanarum* in the mid first century B.C.

In 366 B.C. a *praetor urbanus* was first elected and given responsibility for the administration of justice in Rome. The magistracy enjoyed the right of military command, could initiate legislation and summon the Senate. In c. 242 B.C. a second praetor, *praetor peregrinus*, was created to deal with lawsuits involving foreigners. With the aggregation of the empire the praetorship assumed responsibility for the government of the provinces and its number was increased to four in 227 B.C. and to six in 197 B.C.

Financial quaestors were at first appointed by the consuls, one by each. After 447 B.C. they were elected by the tribal assembly. In 421 B.C. two were added to administer the *aerarium* under senatorial direction. In 267 B.C. four additional praetorial positions were created and were attached to various towns. More positions were added as provinces were organized and the incumbents were despatched there to act as financial secretaries and deputies to the governors.

The *tribunis plebis* were officers of the plebeians. The office was created between 500 and 450 B.C., by 449 B.C. there were ten tribunes who were charged with the defence of the lives and property of the plebeians. They had no statutory base for their power — it derived from an oath of the plebeians to uphold their inviolability. The tribunes asserted a right of veto against any magisterial act, against any elections, laws and *senatus consulta* (the formal advice presented by the Senate to a magistrate). This revolutionary office was gradually recognized by the State and eventually tribunes became indistinguishable from the magistrates of the State although they possessed no *imperium*. They were admitted to listen to the Senate's debates, and from the third century B.C. could convene the Senate. In the second century B.C. the tribunate became sufficient qualification for entry to the Senate.

Aediles originated as two subordinate officials of the plebeians. They seem to have assisted the tribunes and superintended the common temple and the cult of Ceres. These functions extended to the administration of public buildings in general, particularly to the oversight of the archives, both *plebiscita* and *senatus consulta*. In 367 B.C. two *aediles curules*,

elected from the patricians, were added and the aedileship became a magistracy of the whole people.

The censorship was a magistracy which, although lacking in *imperium*, stood at the apex of the republican *cursus honorum* (order of importance of the magistracies). The censorship seems to have been established in 443 B.C. to create and maintain the official list of citizens or census. The censor also maintained the *equitum census*, the list of those liable for cavalry service. The authority and prestige of the magistracy derived from its powers to revise senatorial rolls and delete the name of any senator deemed not to have acted legally and with probity.

The pontifical college presided over the Senate cult generally and had an advisory capacity on matters within its prerogative submitted to it. The head of the college was the Pontifex Maximus, who headed the entire clergy.

This account does not include any discussion of personal archives which from all accounts were massive. The Roman political system was not based on centralized party government. It was government by an elite based on a network of familial ties and patronage. Clans and families were of vital importance and the cult of ancestry was conducive to the collection and retention of personal archives. Because the distinction between personal papers and official papers, which is contentious and blurred today, is not one alluded to by contemporaries undoubtedly some of the papers of all major officials must have been relegated to personal archives rather than to any official institution.

Livy refers to this very phenomenon:

. . . the records of the censors, which the son receives in succession from the father and takes great care to transmit to his posterity, like family rites; and there are many illustrious men of censorian families who preserve these records.<sup>4</sup>

Rome's imperial aggrandizement and administration preoccupied its ruler for most of its existence. Rome first extricated herself from Etruscan power and then proceeded to subdue the Etruscans; the Gauls who pillaged the city around 390 B.C. were also quelled. There followed the Latins, Samnites, Carthaginians, Macedonians, Achaean League members, Corinthians, Tunisians, Sicilians, the Pergamene kingdom, Cyrene, Cyprus, Bithynia-Pontus, Cilicia, Syria, Armenia and Parthia amongst others.

The framework of the government of a province was provided by the *lex provinciae* — the constitution drawn up for it by the Senate. Each governor refined these arrangements and established precedents via the issue of his *translativum* (the edict issued by each governor on his arrival in a province).

The commencement of each year saw the senior elected magistrates await the Senate's determination as to what they were to do in the coming year. The consuls generally remained in reserve as military commanders and were usually directed to take command in the current

theatre of war, however, they did often take up provincial commands. The administration of the provinces generally fell to the praetors. With the growing complexity of domestic administration it became increasingly difficult to divert these magistrates from Rome to the provinces. Consequently, towards the end of the second century B.C., governors were frequently not relieved of their posts at the conclusion of their magisterial terms. They retained their titles to govern and their *imperium*, however, they were termed pro-magistrates and, whether ex-consular or ex-praetorial, they were known as pro-consuls. Not every governor welcomed this extension of power. Cicero, who governed the province of Cilicia, implored his friend Atticus: "In the name of heaven . . . take every possible precaution against the term of my office being extended."<sup>5</sup> He later querulously added "I will bear as best I can a year of office: an extension would kill me."<sup>6</sup>

Provincial governors were accompanied by a financial secretary/adviser who was one of the quaestors of the year — the prompt and efficient retrieval of provincial taxes remained of great interest to the Romans.

Governors were also accompanied by a staff of *legati*, normally senators, to advise and act for them as judges and commanders. The governor was also accompanied by a variety of family members, friends, ambitious young men, a doctor, a priest and an *accensus* or personal secretary, usually a slave or freedman, who controlled the governor's correspondence.

Governors submitted official despatches to Rome, as well as copies of their edicts and reports on major disturbances or negotiations all of which were probably stored in the *aerarium*. However, given the relative autonomy of governors, the rivalry between them and the difficulty contemporaries encountered in establishing the honesty of many provincial commands, means that presumably most of the records created during their terms remained and returned with them.

It seems that some reports were lodged by the governor with the province. Cicero wrote, on his way home to Rome at the conclusion of his term, to Atticus "I have ordered my quaestor Mescinius to wait at Laodicea, so that in accordance with the Julian law I may leave copies of my accounts in two cities."<sup>7</sup>

The various cities in the provinces maintained their own records independently. Cicero in his speech in defense of Lucius Flaccus exclaimed "I come now to the testimony of the people of Dorylaeum [a town in Phrygia, Asia]. When they were introduced they said they had lost the public records near Spelnucae. How greedy for literature these shepherds, these nobodies, were, since they took nothing from these men but the records!"<sup>8</sup>

The various towns in Italy also seem to have maintained their own records for Cicero, in another public speech, indignantly stated: "And

after all this my opponent asks that the archives of Heraclea [a town in Lucania, Southern Italy] should be brought into court, when it is a matter of universal knowledge that these archives were destroyed in the burning of the record-office during the Italian War [the Social War of 90-88 B.C.]”<sup>9</sup>

Cicero’s statements, whilst evidence of the maintenance of provincial and municipal archives, do not induce confidence in the manner in which the authorities approached the safety and integrity of the archives.

### Repositories

Several repositories existed in Rome although only one was purpose built and used exclusively for the storage and servicing of records. The repositories cited below in no way constitute an exhaustive list of those in existence and undoubtedly many existed of which we remain unaware.

The Regia was the building that, amongst other things, housed the archives of the Pontifex Maximus. The priestly college was responsible for the Tabula Pontificum, a whitened board erected in the Regia listing incumbent magistrates and all the events in which the pontifical college had taken ceremonial action, such as, the deaths of priests, the choice of successors, prodigies of all kinds, expiatory sacrifices, fires, floods and famines.

Cicero adverts to these tables and their effect on Roman historiography:

For history began as a mere compilation of annals, on which account, and in order to preserve the general traditions, from the earliest period of the City down to the pontificate of Publius Mucius, each High Priest used to commit to writing all the events of his year of office, and record them on a white surface, and post up the tablet at his house, that all men might have liberty to acquaint themselves therewith, and to this day those records are known as the Pontifical Chronicles.<sup>10</sup>

The Tabula were known to have been destroyed when the Gauls sacked Rome in the early fourth century B.C. However, it is presumed that from that date on they were comprehensive with the information for the years preceding the sack of the city being reconstituted. Late in the second century B.C., 123 B.C., the college published the *annales maximi*. We do know that some eighty volumes constituted the *annales* and it seems certain that they were derived from the Tabula.

The Tabula and the *annales* were obviously available for the consultation, however, the college must have maintained its own administrative records, as did most temples, as well as extremely important private documents. It is known that both Caesar and Augustus entrusted the safe keeping of their wills to the Vestal Virgins. The other records of the Pontifex Maximus, perhaps those relating to magic, augury and other religious powers, seem to have been unavailable for consultation. Livy cites the liberal action of Gnaeus Flavius, a curule aedile, who late in the fourth century B.C.

. . . published the formulae of the civil law, which had been filed away in the secret archives of the pontiffs, and posted up the calendar on white notice-boards about the Forum, that men might know when they could bring an action.<sup>11</sup>

The Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus was originally constructed around 509 B.C. but was not dedicated until 500 B.C. The Temple had a somewhat sorry history being burnt on at least four occasions. The biographer Suetonius in his account of the life of the emperor Vespasian, who ruled between 69-70 A.D., advises that

He personally inaugurated the restoration of the burned Capitol by collecting the first basketful of rubble and carrying it away on his shoulders; and undertook to replace the 3,000 bronze tablets which had been lost in fire, hunting high and low for copies of the inscriptions engraved on them. Those ancient, beautifully phrased records of senatorial decrees and popular ordinances dealt with such matters as alliances, treaties, and the privileges granted to individuals, and dated back almost to the foundation of Rome.<sup>12</sup>

It has been determined, archaeologically and from the context of the reference in Suetonius, that Suetonius was referring to the Temple rather than to the Tabularium. If this is in fact the case it would appear that senatorial records, at least, and perhaps magisterial records, were stored in the Temple.

The Temple of Ceres was the focus of plebeian activities in Rome. The Temple was utilized to store the records of the people, such as plebiscites and *senatus consulta* (advice given by the Senate to magistrates). About the deposition of the latter Livy states

The practice was also instituted by the . . . consuls that the decrees of the senate should be delivered to the aediles of the plebeians at the temple of Ceres. Up to that time [449 B.C.] they were wont to be suppressed or falsified, at the pleasure of the consuls.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, a *senatus consultum* seems to have been completed in duplicate, one copy being forwarded to the aediles whilst the other was maintained in the *aerarium* (the treasury). It would appear that something was lacking in the manner in which these records were maintained and controlled as jurists and writers lament the inability to locate them.

The Temple of Saturn housed the main *aerarium*, or treasury, of Rome. Senatorial records were definitely maintained in the *aerarium* as were financial and other non-financial records, *Senatus consulta* remained invalid until they had been lodged at the *aerarium*. Under the direction of the Senate the quaestors supervised the running of the *aerarium*. Josephus cites a decree that he reproduces in the following manner "Decree of the Senate, copied from the Treasury, from the public tablets of the quaestors . . ." <sup>14</sup> Livy also attests to the depositing of senatorial records in the treasury: ". . . what justice could be expected from a man who had deposited in the treasury a decree of the senate passed stealthily and in a poorly attended meeting . . ." <sup>15</sup>

In addition to senatorial records the *aerarium* presumably housed the host of financial records generated by the state. Cicero in his defense of Lucius Flaccus states:

I am dealing with a state [Rome] most shrewd and detailed in its accounting, in which not a cent could be transferred without the approval of five praetors, three quaestors, four bankers, who among those people are chosen by popular assemblies. . . . If the praetor did pay it — as the record shows it was counted out to him by a quaestor, the quaestor had it from a public bank, the bank had it from an ordinary tax or from tribute.<sup>16</sup>

From Cicero we can infer that the financial transactions of Rome were extensively documented. The financial aspects of the administration of urban Rome must have been involved, in addition, financial records must have been maintained of Rome's extensive military activity and of the complex negotiations with tax farmers in all provinces. There can be little doubt as to the wealth of financial information maintained.

The integrity of these records may, however, have been questionable. Cicero writes:

But let us quit the theatre and visit the law-courts. The praetor is about to take his seat. What is the trial to be about? To find out who set fire to the record office. How could you have a craftier crime? yet Quintus Socius, a distinguished Roman knight, confessed he had done it. To find out who tampered with the public accounts. Well, this again was done by Lucius Alenus, when he forged the handwriting of the six senior treasury clerks; what could be craftier than this fellow?<sup>17</sup>

The Tabularium, or record office, was built in 78 B.C. and was the only purpose built repository in Rome. Only two inscriptions, one found *in situ* in 1845, refer to the building. Both inscriptions are frustratingly concise:

Q. Lutatius Catulus, son of Quintus, grandson of Quintus, consul, by a decree of the Senate, saw to the creation of this building and approved it as satisfactory.<sup>18</sup>

Q. Lutatius Catulus, son of Quintus, grandson of Quintus, consul, by a decree of the Senate, saw to the erection of this substructure and the Tabularium, and approved it as satisfactory.<sup>19</sup>

The Tabularium was built adjacent to the *aerarium* between the two summits of the Capitoline Hill, facing the forum. The building is one of the best preserved Republican buildings — it forms the base of Michelangelo's Palazzo Senatorio. Unfortunately there is no reference to the building in the extant literature therefore one can only speculate that it housed the same records as the *aerarium* perhaps minus the financial records.



The Atrium Libertatis held the censor's registry, most importantly the citizen rolls. The inception of the rolls has been placed at 443 B.C. at which time they were compiled every four years. From 209 B.C. they were compiled every five years. As has already been noted the censors were responsible for maintaining the unimpeachable character of the Senate and were therefore empowered to strike off the senatorial list any senator who was considered to have transgressed. If the censors pursued their task with zeal the amount of personal information amassed must have been considerable.

Livy states:

And the diligence of the censors did not confine itself to regulating the senate and the order of the knights. From the lists of the younger men they culled the names of all who during four years had not served, without having had a legitimate exemption from the service or illhealth as an excuse . . .<sup>20</sup>

Presumably for this very reason the safety of the records was on occasion in jeopardy

. . . a man [Clodius] who considered no evil deed, no impure desire, as sinful; a man who set fire to the temple of the Nymphs, that he might erase the national records of the censor's registration that were printed in the national rolls . . .<sup>21</sup>

The censors were also responsible for the leasing of public areas and buildings and therefore also generated financial records. Little is known about these records. Livy narrates an incident, belonging to the middle of the second century B.C., when an allegation having been made against the censors they:

mounted to the Hall of Liberty and, having there sealed the public accounts and closed the account room and sent away the public slaves, declared that they would transact no public business until the judgment of the people upon them had been passed.<sup>22</sup>

Having briefly surveyed some of the repositories in use in the Roman Republic it may be useful to briefly consider who actually dealt with the records maintained.

As the government of Rome was discharged by magistrates with fixed terms it is difficult to believe that the quaestors, for example, ever had much time to devote to the records in the *aerarium* for which they were responsible.

The public servants of Rome, *apparitores*, were generally freedmen or the sons of freedmen. They were paid an annual salary by the State and attended Roman magistrates. Technically their appointment terminated at the same time as that of the magistrate they attended, however, most retained their posts indefinitely. Scribes formed one of the important classes of public servants. Presumably the quaestors' and aediles' scribes enjoyed the day to day supervision of the records. The profession of archivist certainly did not exist. On this very point Cicero lamented:

We have no guardianship of the laws, and therefore they are whatever our clerks want them to be; we get them from the state copyists, but have no official records.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The wealth of documentary material generated and maintained in Rome must have been awesome. It is regrettable that very little detail can be established as to how the material was maintained and by whom. It is even more regrettable that the reputation of the public archives was none too glittering:

Blessed is he who has been able to win knowledge of the causes of things . . . Happy, too, is he who knows the woodland gods, Pan and old Silvanus and the Sister Nymphs! Him no honours the people give can move, . . . he knows naught of the pang of pity for the poor, or of envy of the rich. He plucks the fruits which his boughs, which his ready fields, of their own free will have borne; nor has he beheld the iron laws, the Forum's madness, or the public archives.<sup>24</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 The one substantial monograph on the subject is E. Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1972). Some research in the area was completed in the 19th century by Italian and German scholars.  
The VIth International Archival Congress in Madrid adopted a resolution requesting the ICA "by every means in its power, to interest itself in the history of archives and encourage and support studies in this field." *Archivum* XVIII, (1968, published 1970), p. 217.
2. With the exclusion of papyrologists who have devoted much time to establishing the origin of discovered papyri.
3. On this point I would diverge from, and strongly disagree with, Posner's statement: "Fortunately, Roman authors have frequently referred to the archives . . . Thus there has come to us a considerable body of data that enables us to piece together in broad outline the history of Roman archives administration." *Archives in the Ancient World*, p. 160.
4. Dio, *Roman History*, Book I, lxxiv, 5.
5. Cicero, *Letters to Atticus*, V, 11.
6. *Ibid.*, V, 15.
7. *Ibid.*, VI, 7.
8. Cicero, *Pro Flacco*, XVII, 39.
9. Cicero, *Pro Archia Poeta*, iv, 8.
10. Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, xii, 52.
11. Livy, Book IX, xlvi, 5.
12. Suetonius, *Lives*, Vespasian 8.
13. Livy, Book III, lv, 13.
14. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XIV, 219.
15. Livy, Book XXXIX, iv, 8.
16. Cicero, *Pro Flacco*, XIX, 44.
17. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, III, xxx, 74.
18. Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, vi, 1313.
19. *Ibid.*, vi, 1314.

20. Livy, Book XXIV, xviii, 7.
21. Cicero, *Pro Milo*, 73.
22. Livy, Book XLIII, xvi, 13.
23. Cicero, *Laws*, III, xx, 46.
24. Virgil, *Georgics*, Book II, 493-502.