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Greek chronography and the list of Roman magistrates

Henrik Gerding

Through the years that I have known Anne-Marie, since she returned to Lund University (for the first time) in 1995, I have only had the privilege to publish something together with her once – a paper on ancient jubilees and chronology.¹ Thus, I find it appropriate to dedicate to her a text that constitutes an offshoot of that particular collaboration. In this paper I present some preliminary thoughts on the background of the Roman consular list, the so called *Fasti consulares*.² The topic will be approached from two different perspectives: the workings of ancient chronography and the spatial context of the monumental epigraphical lists. Hopefully, these two approaches will converge into a coherent picture.

The *Fasti consulares* and *Fastenkritik*

The list of Roman consuls, the *Fasti consulares*, which has come down to us through a range of sources and in slightly different versions, is one of the most important documents concerning the early history of Rome. Both Theodor Mommsen and Karl Julius Beloch emphasised its importance and saw the preserved consular list(s) as a more or less correct representation of the historical facts, although somewhat elaborated. They accepted the *Fasti* as an authentic document from the end of the 4th century BC, compiled on the basis of older records. Chronological difficulties

¹ Leander Touati, Brännstedt & Gerding 2017.

² These thoughts were first presented at the *FokusRom* symposium ‘Time and calendar in ancient Rome’, held on 4 December 2017 at Gothenburg University. The paper had surely never come about, if it had not been for Anne-Marie, who signed me up as a speaker. It is part of Anne-Marie’s many talents that she makes things happen.

connected to this “editorial work” gave rise to some interpolations, but these were considered to be minor. For a long time this has constituted the conventional view.³ T.R.S. Broughton argued that “the degree of agreement [on the list, by the sources] implies a single tradition”,⁴ and according to T.J. Cornell an official list must have been kept from the very beginning of the Republic, although it may have been subject to some corruption in the transmission process and also to some manipulation by the leading families.⁵ Other scholars have been more sceptical, though, stressing the signs of manipulation and questioning the existence of a single tradition.⁶

This particular strand of research developed into a school of its own, known as *Fastenkritik*.⁷ Much interest has been devoted to the true status and cognomina of recorded magistrates, as a way of discerning possible interpolations. The details of the discussion are intricate and require intimate knowledge of the sources. I will not delve into these issues here, but rather approach the question from two alternative angles, beginning with the purpose of lists.

Time-reckoning systems

Chronography, the “writing of time”, requires a chronological framework for describing and measuring the unfolding of events; specifying what came before and what followed after, when things happened and how long ago. In other words, it requires a time-reckoning system. The different strategies that were used in antiquity are well known to us: dating by regal years, eponymous magistrates, synchronisms and eras.⁸

The phenomenon of regal years arose in the early monarchies of Egypt and the Near East. Regal years were used for administrative purposes and by astronomers to date observations, but essentially they were a manifestation of royal power. Just as the increasing numbers of years on the throne strengthened the authority of the ruler, celebrated for example in the Egyptian Heb-Sed feast, the inclusion of the names of rulers in monumental king lists bolstered their legitimacy. They were visibly incorporated in the dynastic line but also associated with the very concept of time. Thus, the lists are analogous to royal genealogies.

³ For a summary of this view, see e.g. Hanell 1946, 118ff.

⁴ Broughton 1952, 637.

⁵ Cornell 1995, 13.

⁶ Most recently Richardson 2017.

⁷ See e.g. Ridley 1980.

⁸ Generational reckoning was also employed, but only offered very rough approximations.

In Greece the corresponding eponymous dates had a somewhat different origin. They stemmed from the duties of the leading officials, which were intimately connected to the annual cycle, until the eponymous magistrate finally came to represent the year itself. Early Greek historians, however, mainly used synchronisms for dating events, that is, by linking them to other events. It had the advantage of providing, not only a designation for the year, but also a context with a set of associations: The Battle of Himera was dated to the same year as the Battle of Salamis,⁹ which is another way of saying that there was a connection between Persian and Carthaginian aggression. It is striking that Herodotos only mentions an Athenian archon for dating purposes once in his entire work.¹⁰ Later on, synchronisms were superseded by eras, counting the years from a fixed point, which often constituted a major event itself. It should be noted that all time-reckoning systems mentioned so far involve two separate components:

1. A set of markers – names and/or numerals – used to designate years
2. A relative order of the markers, from which the absolute positions in time can be deduced

The concept of eponymous magistrates represents a convention, by which a decision or event can be associated to a particular name/year, but it only becomes a time-reckoning system if there is a list, stipulating the relative order of names. Such a list could be memorised and orally transmitted, but in order to attain consensus, some kind of written documents would have been necessary. The numeric markers of an era have the advantage of automatically providing a relative and absolute order – no list is needed. Regal years are something in between, combining names and numerals, but they still require a list, as for example the Egyptian king lists or the Royal Canon. Synchronisms can also be arranged into lists, such as Marmor Parium or the list of Eratosthenes, which allows the calculation of absolute dates through a combination of chronological relationships; relationships that do not necessarily have to be synchronic. Many of the eras used in antiquity probably stem from these lists.

It should also be noted that almost all time-reckoning systems have been created in retrospect, by compiling lists, through the harmonisation of synchronisms, or with the establishment of a distant epoch (i.e. the starting point of an era). Time-reckoning systems that take the present as its point of departure, looking towards the future, are very rare. Thus, we may envisage two stages in the use of eponymous dates: During the first stage eponyms were used only for the designation of years (to separate one year from another). This would have been relevant mainly in the context of the political, judicial and religious duties of the magistrates, as a way of assigning

⁹ Hdt. 7.166.

¹⁰ Hdt. 8.51.

responsibility;¹¹ of course the names could also be used to establish a synchronism. However, only once a retrospective list of magistrates had been compiled and agreed upon do we reach the second stage, where eponymous dates could be used directly to determine relative and absolute positions in time.

According to A. Samuel, who wrote a magisterial work on ancient chronology, there is no known example of dating by archons in Athens before the 5th century BC and even if there were, it does not mean that it was used for time-reckoning purposes.¹² In the American excavations of the Athenian Agora in 1935, however, several fragments of an inscribed archon list were found. It contained names of magistrates referable to the end of the 6th century BC, but the inscription has been dated to about 425 BC on the basis of paleography.¹³ As far as we know, this is the first Athenian archon list.

Beloch asserted that every civilised state needs a time-reckoning system, but this has been questioned by later scholars.¹⁴ We should also consider that, although chronography requires lists, that does not mean that lists were initially made for the sake of chronography.¹⁵ It is telling that Hellanikos, who had access to the list on the Athenian Agora and is credited with extending the archon list back to the mythical Athenian kings, was also accused of not paying enough attention to chronology when writing the history of Athens.¹⁶ Eventually lists of magistrates would become very important to the work of chronographers, but for a long time they remained second to synchronisms and relational dating. The veritable explosion of list-making in the early Hellenistic period should perhaps be explained primarily by a desire to systemise aggregated knowledge.¹⁷

In conclusion, we must not assume that lists of magistrates necessarily are as old as the office of the eponymous magistrates, or that the lists (once they appeared) were used primarily as a time-reckoning system. The monumental display of lists may very well have preceded their use in chronography. Let us now turn back to the Roman *Fasti*.

¹¹ Cf. Thuc. 1.93.3: "Themistocles also persuaded them to finish the walls of Piraeus, which had been begun before, in his year of office as archon ..."

¹² Samuel 1972, 196.

¹³ Meritt 1939; Bradeen 1963.

¹⁴ Beloch 1926,1: "... und ohne eine feste Zeitrechnung kann keine Verwaltung bestehen." *Contra* Rüpke 1995, 189.

¹⁵ Cf. Richardson 2017, 84.

¹⁶ Thuc. 1.97.

¹⁷ Cf. Feeney 2007.

Consular dating

Several scholars have argued that the Romans never fully embraced the era as a way of reckoning time, that they always dated primarily by consular years.¹⁸ It has also been stressed that the different absolute dates (according to our era) that are sometimes seemingly attributed to various events by different Roman authors shouldn't be seen as contradicting each other, since they are referring to the same consular year. Thus, they also imply the same year. They only become contradicting when we attempt to translate the dates to a universal system.¹⁹

On the other hand, it has also been shown that the *Fasti* were manipulated to fit external synchronisms and independently calculated distances in time. If consular dating was preeminent in Rome and an official consular list had been kept since the beginning of the Republic, why didn't that tradition take precedence over other dating schemes, rather than being adjusted according to them? Shouldn't we rather conclude that there was no authoritative list to rely on until the first set of *Fasti* were compiled and put on public display?²⁰ If so, when did it happen?

Cn. Flavius is said to have been the first who made public the *Fasti* of days, i.e. the pre-Julian calendar.²¹ By association, he was also identified by early modern scholars as the first editor of the consular list.²² The building inscription put up by Cn. Flavius as he inaugurated a shrine to Concordia in 304 BC is provided as circumstantial evidence. According to Pliny the Elder, the inscription dated this event to the 204th year after the inauguration of the Capitoline temple (inclusive reckoning), fixing the latter to the year 507 BC.²³ The close correspondence with the beginning of the consular list is often regarded (explicitly or implicitly) as a confirmation of the correctness of the *Fasti*. However, another explanation might be that the early chronographers made the two dates fit. There is no actual evidence that Flavius published a consular list or used it to date his temple. Instead, the inscription can be seen as an indication of the preference for synchronistic (or relational) dating at the time.²⁴ Let us therefore look at the earliest known uses of consular dates.

According to Servius, the annotations of the *Annales Maximi* opened with the consuls of the year, but very little can be said with certainty about these records,

¹⁸ Bickerman 1968, 69, Samuel 1972, 249; Cornell 1995, 399; Feeney 2007, 141: "... the real temporal backbone for Roman historiography is not any era system, but the list of consuls, the *Fasti Consulares*." *Contra* Rüpke (1995, 193), who notes that triumphs in the *Fasti Capitolini* are dated *a.u.c.*

¹⁹ Cornell 1995, 401f.

²⁰ Cf. Rüpke 1995, 201.

²¹ Liv. 9.46.5.

²² For references and discussion, see Oakley 2005, III 613.

²³ Plin. *HN* 33.6.19.

²⁴ The alternative theory of the *clavus annalis* is riddled with problems and is left aside here.

except that they had ceased by the late second century BC. The earliest attestation of a consul is found in the epitaph of Cornelius Scipio Barbatus, from about 280 BC. In a fragment provided by Charisius, Cn. Naevius mentions one of the consuls for the year 262 BC, Marcus Valerius, but only as a part of the narrative. Q. Fabius Pictor dated the foundation of Rome by the Olympic Era. It has been suggested that he used consular dates for more recent events, perhaps on the basis of an assumed annalistic structure, but the known fragments do not give us any consular dates. Pictor mentions the consuls of 294 BC, but without giving their names.²⁵ Another fragment reveals a relational date, stating that the first plebeian consul came into office 22 years after the Gallic sack.²⁶ Ennius does mention consulships for 214, 204 and 200 BC and the names of three more consuls, but all contemporary with the author. The preserved fragments of M. Porcius Cato's *Origines* do not provide any consular dates, hardly and consul names at all,²⁷ and nor do the fragments of L. Cincius Alimentus. L. Cassius Hemina is the first who is known for certain to have used consular dates, indicating events in 219, 181 and 146 BC.²⁸ The slightly later fragments of L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi give consular dates for 305, 158 and 146 BC.²⁹

In conclusion we may say that there is no firm evidence for the use of consular dates before the mid-second century BC.³⁰ If we include the less persuasive testimony of Ennius, we may possibly push the existence of a consular list back to the time of completion of the *Annales* around 171 BC.³¹ However, that list did not necessarily extend further back than the late 4th century BC.

The spatial context of the *Fasti*

Of course, this is a hugely simplistic line of reasoning, based on absence of evidence. Rather than pursuing the complex issue of the annalistic tradition, or lack thereof, we will instead consider the possible spatial context of the first monumental *Fasti*. This was done already in 1995 by J. Rüpke. He took as his starting point the earliest preserved consular list, *Fasti Antiaties Maiores*. Next to the well-known pre-Julian

²⁵ Fabius 1 F18 (Cornell).

²⁶ Fabius 1 F31 (Cornell).

²⁷ Cato (F13 Cornell) dates the founding of Rome in relation to the Trojan War, perhaps using it as an epoch. According to Dionysios, this was *not* the Greek way of dating (Dion. Hal. 1.74.1–2).

²⁸ Hemina 6 F27, F35 & F40 (Cornell).

²⁹ Piso 9 F28, F38 & F42 (Cornell).

³⁰ As argued above, regarding archons, consular names could have been used in an eponymous sense, without the specific intention of providing an absolute date, as for example the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus* from 186 BC, which mentions the consuls in charge of the matter.

³¹ Rich (2011, 16) makes the same observations but draws different conclusions.

calendar from Antium a fragmentary list of consuls was found, which had also been painted onto the wall. Taking into account the missing lines, the list seems to have spanned from 174 or 173 to 67 or 66 BC. Why did it begin with that particular year?

Rüpke suggested that there was a connection between the *Fasti Antiates* and M. Fulvius Nobilior, who is said to have put up a copy of the Roman calendar in the temple of Hercules Musarum, accompanied with historical notes.³² Most likely, this temple was a manubial building, erected soon after Fulvius' Ambracian triumph in 187 BC. The sources (Varro, Censorinus and Macrobius) only speak of a calendar but, given the later recurring combination of calendars and lists of magistrates, the presence of a consular list could be hypothesised also in this case. Furthermore, as a *poeta cliens* closely connected to Fulvius, Ennius would be a likely suspect as the mastermind behind the whole scheme, explaining the historicising aspect of the annotated calendar.³³

However, the *Fasti consulares* first envisaged by Rüpke was not a retrospective list. According to Rüpke's original suggestion, Fulvius merely initiated a list, which began with the newly elected magistrates and to which following censors and consuls were added annually – a forward looking list starting with the year 174 BC. Thus, the *Fasti Antiates Maiores* could be understood as a copy of that particular list.

The idea is compelling, but in order to make the timing fit, Rüpke rejected the idea of a manubial temple and suggested that the calendar rather should be associated with a portico, which was added to an existing temple of Hercules. The portico was commissioned during Fulvius' censorship in 179,³⁴ and the temple perhaps re-inaugurated in 174 BC. According to Rüpke, this would have been the temple of Hercules Custos, but later known as the temple of Hercules Musarum. If we leave aside the hypothetical connection between the *Fasti consulares* and the calendar of Fulvius, and focus only on the spatial and temporal context, another equally interesting option presents itself.

During the censorship of M. Fulvius Nobilior and M. Aemilius Lepidus in 179 BC a large number of buildings were commissioned, besides the abovementioned portico, most notable among them the so called Basilica Fulvia, also known as Basilica Aemilia et Fulvia or just Basilica Aemilia. Situated on the north side of the Forum, it had a crucial role in defining the spatial configuration of the urban environment. The building is also frequently highlighted in ancient sources as a key monument in the city.³⁵

Livy lists the basilica among the buildings commissioned by Fulvius, but most scholars attribute an equal share of responsibility to his colleague M. Aemilius

³² Rüpke 1995, 199; 2013.

³³ Rüpke 2013.

³⁴ Liv. 40.51.4–6.

³⁵ For a detailed study of the monument, see Freyberger 2016.

Lepidus. It has also been proposed that Aemilius oversaw the completion of the construction after Fulvius' death, the exact time of which is unknown. In the first century BC the basilica was closely related to *gens Aemilia*.

Among the different projects of 179 BC, the basilica would have been the grandest and probably also the last one to be finished. Still, the building could very well have reached its completion within the five-year cycle of the censorship. The year 175 BC makes a good candidate, and would have made the inauguration coincide with the second consulship and triumphal celebration of M. Aemilius Lepidus.³⁶ What better way to celebrate this occasion, and at the same time make a deliberate retort to his old-time enemy Fulvius' calendar, than to put up a monumental list of magistrates? However, rather than making a beginning, as first suggested by Rüpke, this was most probably a retrospective list looking backwards in time.³⁷ Just as Fulvius' annotated calendar, the list of magistrates celebrated the history and tradition of Rome, but in a more majestic and perhaps more Greek way.

Thus, the *Fasti Antiaties* could be based on an urban prototype, just as Rüpke suggested, but another one that took up were Aemilius' list left off. It is significant, I believe, that such a monumental list, inscribed or painted on the walls of the basilica, would end with the name of its commissioner. Still, the consular list would primarily constitute a symbol of Rome's glorious past, comparable to the reliefs that decorated the Basilica Aemilia (and other Roman basilicas), displaying scenes of the city's legendary history.³⁸ The proper context for such a display has been supplied by K. Welch.³⁹

Welch associated the early Roman Basilica with Hellenistic royalty. According to her, the first Basilica Aemilia replaced the old Atrium Regium as an official reception building for Greek envoys and kings, modelled on the royal reception halls in Pergamon and Alexandria. These were buildings where monumental king lists can be expected to have been put on display. Welch stresses the intensity in diplomatic relations in the early second century and the associated desire among the Roman *nobilitas* to impress on their Greek counterpart. That impression would not have been restricted solely to architecture, but would also include allusions to the history of Rome, the antiquity of its constitution and the precedence of its magistrates. M. Aemilius Lepidus was sent out on a diplomatic mission between 201 and 199 BC, which took him to Alexandria and probably also to other royal cities. Later on, in 175 BC, as pontifex maximus, former censor, *princeps senatus*, consul for the second time

³⁶ I am indebted to Lewis Webb for pointing out the possible concurrence with the triumph of Aemilius.

³⁷ Cf. Feeney 2007, 170 n. 25. Rüpke also modified his stance, suggesting that the Fulvian *Fasti* included both a list of previous magistrates and a section to be filled in successively (Rüpke 2006).

³⁸ Kränzle 1991.

³⁹ Welch 2003.

and *triumphator*, he would have counted as the leading figure of the state.⁴⁰ All in all, this makes him a likely commissioner of the first monumental *Fasti*.

In 78 BC Aemilius' descendant and namesake furnished the basilica with shields decorated with the portraits of notable ancestors together with their titles – basically an illustration of the *Fasti*.⁴¹ In 54 BC L. Aemilius Paullus, sponsored by Caesar, began a partial restoration of the basilica, but the extent of the work is unclear, as is the fate of the possible list inside. However, in 14 BC the Basilica Aemilia was completely destroyed in a fire, and a replacement of both the basilica and the list would have been due.

The construction of a new basilica took some time, but a new consular list was promptly supplied. The exact time and place for putting up the *Fasti Capitolini* is debated.⁴² However, the fragments were found in the northwest corner of the Forum, suggesting a position either on an arch, which was later joined to the new Basilica Aemilia, or on the Regia. Regarding the date, it can be noted that the fourth and last regular *tabula* ends with the year 12 BC. The following annotations on a pilaster are clearly later additions. If the old list was lost in the great fire in 14 BC, and replaced by a monumental inscription two years later, it would coincide with Augustus becoming pontifex maximus, but also more generally with a period when Augustus was deeply preoccupied with time, ranging from the *Ludi Saeculares* to the *Horologium Augusti*.

It has been argued by Rüpke that the calendar and the consular list were two separate phenomena that did not originally belong together.⁴³ He saw the list as having developed from the annalistic tradition, which itself was not very old. Still, in imperial times they are often found together. Possibly they were brought together by a similar use in public displays, not as complementary aids for finding out the correct date, but rather because of their common ability to link the present with the past, in a Roman and Greek way respectively.

⁴⁰ *RE* I.1 (1893), 552f. s.v. Aemilius 68 (E. Klebs).

⁴¹ Plin. *HN* 35.4.13. This contribution was commemorated on a coin by another family member.

⁴² See e.g. Simpson 1993; Östenberg 2009.

⁴³ Rüpke 1995. For the opposite view, see Hanell 1946, 69.

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