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The Seed of Principate: Annona and Imperial Politics

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The Seed of Principate: *Annona* and Imperial Politics

Joseph B. Ruter III

Honors Bachelor of the Arts Thesis

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Dedication:

To my grandmother Cecilia,

I remember still your assessment of the Julio-Claudians,
given in my Prep year of high school.

Committee:

Director: Dr. Thomas Strunk

Readers: Dr. Amit Sen and Dr. Arthur Dewey

Introduction: Bread for the People; Work for the Emperor

Rumors were spreading around the streets and porticos of Rome. Ever since the annual convoy of grain ships from Alexandria became late, the Roman people were anxious. Was the convoy delayed by a late autumn gale? Or did a tempest destroy the convoy and its precious cargo? In most years, the people could trust in the grain reserves and the *praefectus annonae*'s management of the market. Due to a disappointing Sicilian harvest, however, this year was different. Since the people expected supplies to run out any day, people were beginning to hoard grain for themselves. Prices skyrocketed. Unable to afford enough bread, the poor soon starved in the streets and within the tenements. In a few days, the poor plebeians grew restless. Reports spread about grain stashes and profiteers, about corruption and private scandals. In a few more days, conflicts arise. Some gather outside the houses of merchants; others inside the forum to demand political action. As demands become more and more radical, the peaceful protests degenerate into violence. Factions clash in the streets of Rome. Strife reigns. The Eternal City passes away.

Thanks to their prudent management of *annona*, the grain supply to the city of Rome, the emperors of the Principate avoided this sort of political strife. For the Romans, *annona* originally encompassed the contemporary economic concepts of market supply and price of food.¹ In my argument, I will use the word *annona* in the Roman sense to encapsulate the entire evolving relationship between government and the food market. As early as Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*, *annona* possesses this dual sense: *quí homines probi essent, esset is annona vilior*, "he would be rather common in supply (or cheap in price) than whichever men are honest" (3.1.138).² Due to

¹Andrews, Freund, Lewis, and Short. 1966: 27.

² All translations are the work of the author.

the economic evolution of Rome, which I will explore in my first chapter, *annona* came to refer to government interventions within the market for food. Since wheat in the form of bread supplied the majority of calories, especially for the poorer plebeians, the government focused its interventions on the market for wheat.³ To ensure its supply, the Late Republic and the Principate introduced new infrastructure and incentives for private merchants to import it. One of the principal historians of the Principate, Tacitus, credits the rise of Augustus to his superior ability to organize *annona* (*Annales* 1.2).

Sprouting from the major grain-exporting provinces, the system of *annona* extended to the city of Rome itself. Since the city of Rome exceeded the capacity of local food sources in its growth after the Punic Wars, Rome relied upon imports of foreign grain. Despite the variety of Roman grain sources, the fields of Sicily, North Africa, and Egypt supplied the majority of grain within the city of Rome.⁴ Scholar Lionel Casson estimates that in the first century CE Rome imported 60,000,000 *modii* or 400,000 tons of grain every year from North Africa and Egypt, using evidence from Aurelius Victor (*Caesar* 1.6) and Josephus (*De bello Judaico libri* 2.383, 386).⁵ Casson's estimate however ignores continuing Sicilian grain importation. Assuming Republican levels of production, Sicily could supply 2,500,000 *modii*.⁶ Although a relatively small exporter, Sicily remained a critical supplier of grain due to its proximity, especially just before the sailing season, when the Roman grain supply tended to run low.⁷

³ Rickman 1980: 7.

⁴ See Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis* 18.12.

⁵ Casson 1979: 21.

⁶ Erdkamp 2005: 216. V.M. Scramuzza bases his estimate on a Ciceronian remark that Verres collected 3,000,000 *modii* tithe from Sicily. From this, Scramuzza calculates a total Sicilian production of 38,800,000 *modii*, adding the production of tithe-exempt communities and the profit of the *publicani*. After subtracting the amount to seed the fields and to feed the population, Scramuzza finds 2,500,000 *modii* available for export. Despite scholarly debate about the validity his assumptions, I include Scramuzza's number to provide a rough scale of magnitude estimate- as all the estimates of this paper are to a greater or lesser extent. See Scramuzza 1959 for Scramuzza's original calculations and justifications.

⁷ Erdkamp 2005: 219.

Rather than through private sales, grain primarily entered the market through taxes-in-kind and through the rental of Imperial lands. Tacitus records *at frumenta et pecuniae vectigales, cetera publicorum fructuum societatibus equitum Romanorum agitabantur* (Ann. 4.6), “but grain and revenue of money and the other things of public income were handled by associations of the Roman equestrians.” Most of these grain levies, *frumenta vectigales*, emerged during the Republic, as the Roman Republic adapted the fiscal machinery of its conquered provinces to its own benefit. In Sicily, the Republic continued and expanded the system of grain-tithes that existed within Carthaginian Sicily and Greek Syracuse.⁸ While Augustus and his successors inherited similar arrangements in North Africa and Egypt, the Emperors also possessed substantial personal lands there, the *partimonium principis*, from their conquests and confiscations.⁹ Through their financial agents, *procuratores*, they leased the operations of the individual estates to estate operators, *conductores*. The *conductores* leased out parcels to sharecroppers, guaranteeing the emperor a vast income of grain.¹⁰ The farmers generally had to transport their grain to the village threshing floors for tax assessment.¹¹ Having entered the market through taxes, grain entered onto the transport ships.

While the *conductores* and *publicani* handled the transport of grain rent or tax payments to the shipping ports in Sicily and North Africa, Egypt had special arrangements from Ptolemaic rule. After its transport during the months of April and May, local officials collected the grain from the taxpayers and organized its transport to state granaries during the months of May and June.¹² Once in the granary, regional officials called *sitologi* stored seed grain for next year’s

⁸ Rickman 1980: 37.

⁹ Erdkamp 2005: 221.

¹⁰ Ibid.: 222-3.

¹¹ Adams 2007: 166. Adams notes the possibility that state or imperial land-leasers may have paid the government to provide transportation. Despite the extensive documentation for Egyptian taxation, evidence for this aspect remains unclear, complicated through regional and temporal variations.

¹² Adams 2007: 169-70.

crop, private grain for trade, and public grain for Alexandria and ultimately Rome, while reporting their amounts to the *strategos* of their *nome*.¹³ In turn, the *sitologoi* managed the transport from granaries to ports, whether through barge or over-land transport. For over-land transport, the *sitologoi* relied on a system of transport donkey liturgies whereby *stratego*i compelled wealthy private individuals to supply three donkeys for a year.¹⁴ Once transported overland to a river port, porters loaded the Alexandria-bound ships, while the ship captains issued receipts to the *stratego*i.¹⁵ Under the supervision of the *procurator Neaspoleos*, the official overseer of Egyptian grain transport, the captains, who organized into shipping associations, transported the grain to Alexandria.¹⁶ From Alexandria, from other African ports, and from the ports of Sicily, porters loaded the grain into another set of ships for its transport across the Mediterranean Sea.

Since Augustus and his successors established no national merchant marine, despite Augustus' creation of permanent naval fleets at Ravenna and Misenum, the *navicularii* and the *negotiatores*, the private shippers and grain merchants, conveyed the grain to Ostia during the summer months.¹⁷ In order to encourage the development of private shipments, the emperors created incentives for investment. Claudius, for instance, guaranteed the losses of the *negotiatores* during winter shipments; later emperors "exempted ship-owners from civic *munera* if they put at the state's disposal a ship of *c.* 340 tons or several ships of *c.* 70 tons."¹⁸ While Claudius' intervention failed to extend the shipping season beyond the traditional late May to

¹³ Adams 2007: 171.

¹⁴ Adams 2007.: 173. cf. the transport liturgy *trionia onekasia* with the Athenian institution of *chorēgia*- required sponsorship of a tragic chorus or a naval trireme.

¹⁵ Adams 2007: 193.

¹⁶ Adams 2007: 193.

¹⁷ Rickman 1980: 71-2.

¹⁸ Wilson 2011: 41.

early September window, later imperial interventions did lead to expansion of the grain fleet.¹⁹ Upon reaching Ostia, the *navicularii* entered the “artificial harbor built at Portus by Claudius to provide a sheltered deep water harbor for the grain fleet, which previously had to anchor off the river mouth at Ostia.”²⁰ Once in port, the *procurator annonae*, a subordinate of the *praefectus annonae*, and his staff paid the *navicularii* for their sea transport, after measuring and unloading their grain.²¹ With this payment, the final leg of this grain’s journey begins.

The *procurator annonae* and *praefectus annonae*, after managing the storage and shipment of grain from Ostia to Rome, distributed the grain for the *annona*. Until its transport, the *procurator annonae* stored the grain within a system of public granaries in Ostia, which he constructed and maintained.²² As in Rome, *horreae*, public granaries, in Ostia were a large series of brick-faced concrete rooms around a central corridor or courtyard, easily accessible to porters.²³ In the storage rooms, small windows above the door and back wall, as well as a raised floor, created the dim and cool environment necessary to preserve grain.²⁴ Once the *procurator annonae* secured transport, his staff loaded the grain onto one of the specialized river barges, the *navis codicaria*, in which a team of oxen or men could easily tow approximately 68 tons up the meandering 22 miles of the Tiber River.²⁵ Having arrived in the Emporium district, Rome’s river port, the *navis codicaria* were unloaded by porters (*saccarii*) into Rome’s *horreae* where their cargo was measured and stored. To distribute *frumentationes*, free grain, or to manipulate the

¹⁹ Rickman 1980: 128.

²⁰ Wilson 2011: 47.

²¹ Houston 1979: 160-1.

²² Houston 1979: 161.

²³ Before the first century A.D., many of the “public” granaries were privately owned and rented by the state for its public grain distribution under “an unregimented system of private hire (*locatio-conductio*).” Through a process of confiscation and purchase, the Emperor gradually acquired the private granaries, adding too a number of newly constructed public granaries. Rickman 1980: 137.

²⁴ Rickman 1980, 138.

²⁵ Rickman 1980, 19.

market price, the *praefectus annonae* could use the supplies from his *horreae*.²⁶ To distribute the *frumentationes* to its recipients, the *praefectus annonae* from his headquarters in the *Porticus Minucia Frumentia* appointed a regular day each month and regular places, presumably either the *horreae* themselves or various *portici*.²⁷ While the precise qualifications to receive public grain varied, all qualified recipients needed to present their tickets or *tesserae* in exchange for their public grain- some 5 *modii* or approximately enough for an adult male to survive.²⁸

I offered a brief overview of the system that Augustus and his successors created to ensure the grain supply of Rome. Considering the politics behind its development, I conclude that Augustus and his successors subsumed the traditional authority of the Senate over *annona* to stabilize popular support for the Principate, developing a new infrastructure and imperial bureaucracy for its delivery. In the first chapter, after I contextualize the institution of *annona* in agricultural and logistical conditions of the ancient world, I will review its origins and its role in the politics of the Late Republic. In my second chapter, I will analyze the *Res Gestae*, Cassius Dio, Suetonius, and Tacitus to understand the evolution of imperial *annona* policy and its political implications. In my conclusion, I reflect upon the political and social impacts of the *annona*. Before I begin my argument, I wish to address two issues of data and methodology.

First, since few “official” records survive for the Principate, I will have to reconstruct the *annona* policy of the Principate and its political implications from ancient historical accounts. The *Res Gestae* and its sole mention of *annona* serve as our only official documentation from the reign of Augustus. Beyond this, I have to rely upon the conflicting accounts of the imperial historians: Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio. While Tacitus and Suetonius can agree upon the

²⁶ Casson 1979: 25.

²⁷ For a further discussion of the *Porticus Minucia Frumentia* and its role in the later Principate, see Rickman 1980: 253-6.

²⁸ Rickman 1980: 173, 186.

supply importance of Egypt (*Historiae* 1.11; *Divus Augustus* 18), the two do not report any other common facts. Instead, each author employs crises of grain distribution to characterize their subject emperors in their broader story. To learn what I can from history, I will contextualize the references to *annona* in the authors' broader narrative about the emperors, the political context of the Principate, and the underlying economic conditions.

Second, since I depend substantially upon economic contextualization for my analysis, I will defend my ability to apply economic analysis in the ancient world against economic primitivism. As advanced in Moses I. Finley's *The Ancient Economy*, the position of economic primitivism argues that since the ancients lack economic vocabulary, especially for the public economics, the ancients make their decisions on non-economic social grounds.²⁹ Given that assumption, the primitivists conclude that economic analysis should not be applied to the ancient world. I protest every proposition of this argument. While the economic vocabulary of the ancient world lacks the precision of modern economic terminology, the concept of *annona* as supply and price of food reflects an economic and political awareness, at least for the Romans. Since demand for food is stable, the supply and price will change together. Even if I would accept the first proposition, I could still reject the second. Since Roman senators were not to engage in trade, the majority seem to have appointed freemen to manage their mercantile affairs. Should one accept the primitivist position, one cannot explain why senators would trouble themselves with trade in the first place. Once the ancients decide in an economic fashion, economic analysis becomes applicable.

²⁹Finley 1999: 1.

Chapter 1: Sowing the Seeds (509-27BCE)

In this chapter, I explore the practical context of the *annona* and its evolving role in the politics of the Roman Republic (509-27 BCE). Despite the improvements of the Roman Republic and Empire, grain as a bulk commodity remained too expensive to transport except over the sea. Combined with volatile weather and limited agricultural technology, the challenges of transportation ensured that the *annona* would become an issue in the city of Rome. Before the Punic Wars, the Roman Senate managed the *annona* with only its own special shipments of grain to maintain control over the plebeians in times of crisis. While the economic dislocations and transformation of the Punic and Macedonian Wars created new challenges for the maintenance of the *annona*, the Senate did not employ its authority to address these challenges with new policies out of its own self-interest. To remedy the issues of the *annona*, the Gracchi brothers as tribunes passed a series of novel reforms, the first land and grain distributions, between 133 and 123 BCE through the *consilium plebis*, the legislature of the plebeians. While the Senate stopped the Gracchi brothers and reversed their achievements through cooption and coercion by 81 BCE, the Senate restored grain distributions in 75 BCE. Due to its administrative inability, the Senate lost its authority over piracy and over the distribution in 67 and 58 BCE through a series of radical tribunes despite cooption and coercion. In the final days of the Republic, Pompey and Caesar reformed the distributions to make them sustainable. I conclude that, while the Senate and its elite fought enterprising politicians to maintain its traditional *annona* authority throughout the Roman Republic, the Senate failed to achieve a successful system of *annona* administration.

The harsh constraints of ancient agriculture and logistics shaped the development of *annona* through the course of Roman history. Despite the development of the Roman road system, the Mediterranean Sea was the Roman world's fastest and cheapest method of

transportation. By pack animal, an eighth of a ton of goods could travel three miles an hour on the road; by cart, a half-ton of goods two miles an hour.³⁰ With the proper prevailing winds, a ship with eighty tons of goods could clip along at four miles per hour.³¹ While no direct evidence exists for the Republic and Principate, Diocletian's Edict suggests that in the fourth century one could ship grain from Syria to Spain by sea more cheaply than from Rome to Pompeii by land.³² Despite their speed and economy, ships were still too slow to carry foods other than wine, olive oil, fish sauce, and grain due to spoilage. Of the transportable food stuffs, grain was the only one with enough nourishment to feed the Roman people. Five *modii* or 75 pounds of the preferred grain, wheat, could feed an adult male for a month with only a few other fruits and vegetables to supply his nutrients.³³ Since the Romans had to import grain for food because of their logistical constraints, the constraints of cereal production become important to the development of *annona*.

In the ancient Mediterranean, agriculture was characterized by high volatility and low yields. If rainfall and temperatures vary from year-to-year and place-to-place within the ancient Mediterranean, as in the modern, ancient agriculture would suffer from frequent crop failures. Examining the crop-critical October-May precipitation within Attica between 1931 and 1960, Peter Garnsey finds that wheat fails more than once every four years and barley once every twenty.³⁴ Even accounting for higher Italian rainfall, wheat and even barley failed often. Since ancient farmers had to ensure their own food supply in the volatile Mediterranean climate, whether as tenants on large farms or owners of their own fields, farmers would have chosen to cultivate their fields less intensively and more extensively, following the strategy of more recent

³⁰ Rickman 1980: 14.

³¹ Rickman notes how Ostia-Alexandria ships could make the journey of a thousand miles in ten days. By comparison, the return voyage was double the time on a less direct route. See Rickman 1980: 15.

³² Rickman 1980: 15.

³³ Rickman 1980: 5.

³⁴ Garnsey 1988: 10.

peasant communities.³⁵ Instead of one big central field, ancient farmers would have had several smaller fields in their local region to take advantage of micro-climates.³⁶ Instead of one grain, they would have grown several different grains.³⁷ While lower risk barley and millet satisfied the dietary needs of ancient farmers, they grew higher risk wheat for their tax and rent payments. Urban consumers valued wheat over barley and millet for its ability to make bread rather than porridge.³⁸ Even if the climate and farmer acclimations had not conspired against *annona*, *annona* would have still encountered the limitations of ancient agricultural technology.

Roman farmers were subject to the limitations of arid agriculture. An arid is an early form of plow. Unlike the later forms of the plow, arids can only scratch the surface of land enough to seed the land, not to prepare the land. Before plowing, farmers had to remove the vegetation from their fields with hoes.³⁹ Without the horse collar, ancient farmers employed relatively slow oxen and mules to drive their arids.⁴⁰ Since the land preparation consumed so much labor, farmers tended to fallow a half of their fields in any given year, leaving the agricultural burden on half of the land. According to a contemporary analysis, Roman agriculture would have yielded an average surplus of around 65.52 pounds of grain per acre compared with yields of 305.78 pounds per acre with modern fallow-less plow agriculture.⁴¹ Lower yields mean that Roman farmers would have required around four times more land to feed Rome than modern farmers. Combined with climatic and logistical challenges, the limits of agricultural technology made *annona* an inevitable problem for the Republic.

³⁵ For peasant agriculture in the Mediterranean, see Halstead: 2014.

³⁶ Garnsey 1988: 46.

³⁷ Garnsey 1988: 49.

³⁸ Rickman 1980: 5.

³⁹ Mazoyer and Roudart. 2006: 54.

⁴⁰ Rickman 1980: 13.

⁴¹ Mazoyer and Roudart 2006: 56.

Before the Punic Wars, the Roman Senate managed the *annona*, according to later histories, with only its own special shipments of grain to maintain control over the plebeians in times of crisis. While the historians of the period wrote several hundred years after the fact, their accounts could have relied upon the annals of the *Pontifex Maximus* and its reliable records of high food prices, climatic conditions, and warfare.⁴² From the annuals and the traditions, Livy and his fellows could have reconstructed the history of *annona* with relative precision. Scholar Peter Garnsey counts sixteen grain crises before the Punic Wars.⁴³ Of these early sixteen crises, two offer the most insight into early *annona*: first the crisis of 492 BCE; second the situation of 440-439 BCE.

In 492 BCE, the Senate assumed the final responsibility to maintain the *annona*. Livy records that after a year of tension between the patricians and plebeians about the burdens of military conscription and consequent debt slavery, *eo anno cum et foris quieta omnia a bello essent et domi sanata discordia, aliud multo gravius malum civitatem invasit, caritas primum annonae ex incultis per secessionem plebis agris, fames deinde, qualis clausis solet* (2.34.1-2), “In that year, when every place outside was undisturbed by war and the discord at home was healed, another much more serious evil visited the city. First, there was dearness of grain supply from a lack of cultivation through the departure of the plebs from the fields, then famine, such as a besieged city is accustomed.” In response to the crisis, the Senate sent emissaries to seek grain from Etruria to Sicily (2.34). In that moment, however, senator Marcius Coriolanus attempted to persuade his fellow senators to withhold their supply of grain from the plebeians so that the Senate might compel them to surrender the tribuneship. Rejecting the proposal of Coriolanus and abandoned him to suffer the plebeians’ wrath, the Senate established a tradition of its

⁴² Garnsey 1988: 167.

⁴³ Garnsey 1988: 168-172.

responsibility over *annona* (2.35). In fifty-two years, the Senate would guard its responsibility against an equestrian benefactor.

In 439 BCE, the Senate and its representative Lucius Minucius defended their responsibility for *annona* against Spurius Maelius. Since the grain crop had failed in the previous year, Rome experienced a bumper crop of political contention in 439 BCE. Over the protests of the Senate, for whom the evident cause of the crisis was popular politics and its distractions, the tribunes secured the extraordinary appointment of Lucius Minucius as *praefectus annonae* (Livy *Ab Urbe* 4.12). Despite his earnest efforts to seek grain from the Italians, to imitate grain dealers, and to disperse hordes of grain, Lucius was utterly unsuccessful as the *praefectus annonae*. In response, Livy records how:

tum Sp. Maelius ex equestri ordine, ut illis temporibus praedives, rem utilem pessimo exemplo peiore consilio est adgressus. frumento namque ex Etruria privata pecunia per hospitum clientiumque ministeria coempto, quae, credo, ipsa res ad levandam publica cura annonam impedimento fuerat, largitiones frumenti facere instituit plebemque hoc munere delinitam, quacumque incederet, conspectus elatusque supra modum hominis privati secum trahere, haud dubium consulatum favore ac spe despondentem. (*Ab Urbe* 4.13)

Then Spurius Maelius from the equestrian order, as a rich man for those times, tempered with a useful undertaking in the worst precedent with worse judgement. For when he had purchased grain from Etruria with his personal money through the work of his foreign guest-friends and his clients, which affair itself I believe was an impediment to alleviate the grain market with public care, he organized a public distribution for grain. By this service, the plebeians were charmed. Whenever he walked, he was seen and was raised to bear himself above the mode of a private man. The man was not in doubt in his support and despairing in his hope for the consulship.

Seeing how the popular Spurius Maelius subverted its traditional authority with his purchases of available grain, the Roman Senate appointed Cincinnatus and Servilius Ahala as Dictator and Master of the Horse to take control over the situation (4.14). When Sevilius summoned Spurius

for trial before Cincinnatus and the Senate, Spurius resisted and was killed (4.15). In their actions against Spurius, the Senate established an undisputed authority over the *annona*.

While the economic dislocations and transformation of the Punic and Macedonian Wars created new challenges for the maintenance of the *annona*, the Senate did not address these challenges out of its own self-interest. Since the legions of the Roman Republic conscripted recruits only from the ranks of landowners, the small peasant farmers of Italy often suffered long absences from their farmlands during the period of the Punic and Macedonian Wars.⁴⁴ To escape the conscription, small peasant farmers started to sell their lands to the wealthy.⁴⁵ Thanks to their control of war contracts and war booty, a small class of senators and equestrians in Rome had become wealthy enough to make large investments in large rural estates full of profitable pasture lands.⁴⁶ These displaced small farmers would converge upon the city of Rome to build its infrastructure and to support its wars. Hence, the population of Rome grew an average of 4,000 people per annum after the Punic War.⁴⁷ With its large population of 500,000 people, Rome strained its traditional supplies of grain in Italy. Given the constraints of ancient logistics, farmers near to Rome devoted their fields to the production of fruits, vegetables, and meat to exploit the local demand of the wealthy, straining the grain supply further.⁴⁸ Despite these new challenges, the Senate created no new policy to replace its previous ad hoc measures and to address the concerns of Rome's new inhabitants out of its self-interest.

Due to the electoral system, the Senate represented the interests of the wealthy equestrians and Senators rather than the poor plebeians. Like the United States before 1911, the

⁴⁴ Stockton 1979: 9.

⁴⁵ Kay 2014: 25. Between 225 and 23 BCE, the median size of the Roman army amounted to some 13% of the adult male citizen population, perhaps the highest proportion of a pre-industrial state.

⁴⁶ Stockton 1979: 12.

⁴⁷ Morley 1996: 39.

⁴⁸ Morley 1996: 86-90. Besides vegetable and fruit production, Morley identifies that tombs and pleasure parks additionally displaced grain-land.

citizens of the Roman Republic did not directly elect their Senators. Instead the citizens elected two censors in the *comitia centuria*, centuriate assembly, to select their new Senators from the ranks of the junior magistrates, the quaestors and the aediles.⁴⁹ While an indirect election could have represented the poor, the voting procedures of *comitia centuria* ensured that the censors considered the interests of the wealthy. Organized into five classes on the basis of wealth, the Roman citizens voted as part of 193 centuries in order of their wealth.⁵⁰ Since the majority vote of 97 centuries could decide an election, elections were often decided by the three wealthiest classes.⁵¹ Given the influence of the wealthy, consuls and censors not surprisingly came from a few wealthy old families with the exception of a few *novi homines*, “new men.”⁵² While consuls and censors could have run on the platform of the wealthy interests and then reneged on their election promises, the equestrian and senatorial domination of courts and law enforcement ensured the obedience of the consuls and censors to their interests.⁵³ Given its constituency, the Senate could not agree upon any new policy to address the fundamental issues of the *annona*.

While the Senate could have implemented new three policies to address the *annona*'s issues in the context of the second century BCE, the wealthy constituents of the Senate would have opposed any new action.⁵⁴ First, the Senate could have resettled the expanding population of poor plebeians on public lands, the *ager publicus*, to reduce demand. Formed from confiscations of defeated Italian states in the third century BCE, the *ager publicus* had come under the long-term occupation of Rome's elites and Italian allies by the second century BCE.⁵⁵ Given the political influence of the elites, the Senate would have avoided any appropriation of

⁴⁹ Stockton 1978: v.

⁵⁰ Stockton 1978: ix.

⁵¹ Millar 1998: 17.

⁵² Stockton 1978: iix.

⁵³ Stockton 1978: xi.

⁵⁴ Garnsey 1988: 69.

⁵⁵ Roselaar 2010: 150; Stockton 1979: 135.

their property. Second, the Senate could have prescribed the growing of grain instead of cattle or wine in Italy. Beyond the challenges of enforcement, the Senate would have avoided any restriction on land usage out of financial self-interest of its members. Thanks to the Lex Claudia of 218 BCE, which prohibited Senators from the direct possession of trade vessels, and long-standing cultural norms, Senators focused their investments in agriculture.⁵⁶ Regarding agriculture, even Cato the Elder, infamous as a severe proponent of traditional society, advised his readers to invest in vineyards and vegetable gardens over grainland for higher returns (*De Agri.* 1). Third, the Senate could have subsidized the transportation and sale of grain for the poor plebeians. While grain subsidies would not have hurt the economic interests of the Senate, state grain subsidies would have removed a political opportunity for Senators to win supporters with shipments of cheap grain.⁵⁷ By this time, the major families of Senators had invested in major warehouses to store their patronage and made contacts in the *comitia centuria* to distribute it.⁵⁸ Unable to act, even if still able to react, the Senate ceded the initiative over the *annona* to the popular assembly of the plebs, *concilium plebis*.

Unlike the *comitia centuria*, the *concilium plebis* represented the poor Roman citizenry and their interests. In the *concilium plebis*, the majority of the Roman citizens joined one of thirty five “tribes” to enact public laws.⁵⁹ Since the tribes were of equal size to represent the four urban districts in Rome and thirty one rural districts across Italy, each voter possessed an equal say in the vote of the tribe. While a minority of wealthy rural voters had once had outsize influence due to the high cost of travel, the migration of poor rural voters with rural registrations

⁵⁶ Erdkamp 2005: 119.

⁵⁷ Garnsey 1988: 197.

⁵⁸ Williamson 2005: 260.

⁵⁹ Since the *comitia tribuna* was formed after the succession of the plebeians in 492 BCE to give the plebeians a voice, the assembly excluded a small number of wealthy patrician families from its votes. Stockton 1979: ix.

eroded their influence.⁶⁰ Of equal importance, the tribes voted in a random order. While a fixed order would have given the second seventeen tribes less influence than the first eighteen, who could decide the matter on their own, a random order gave every tribe and hence every voter an equal vote.⁶¹ Since individual voters in the *concilium plebis* could not propose amendments to legislation, it is important that the *concilium plebis* also elected tribunes of plebeians from among the Senatorial class. As the leaders of the *concilium plebis*, the tribunes proposed its legislation. While Senators might have threatened the tribunes to stop the radical regulations, the tribunes enjoyed personal protection from the Senate and a personal veto over its acts while in the city of Rome. Under a succession of populist leaders, the *populares*, the *concilium plebis* addressed the issues of the *annona*.

In 133 BCE, the tribune Tiberius Gracchus passed his *lex Sempronia agraria* through the *concilium plebis* to resettle poor Romans on the *ager publicus*. Re-imposing the previous limit of 500 *iugera* or around 300 acres on personal occupations of the *ager publicus*, the *lex Sempronia agraria* compensated wealthy landholders for their loss of the *ager publicus*. In exchange for a secure unalienable title over legal occupations of 300 acres, with an additional 150 acres per son, the *lex Sempronia agraria* called for people with excessive holdings to surrender them to a public lands commission (*App. Civ. Bel.* 1.9). Composed of three men, the elected commission surveyed, recovered, and transferred parcels of the *ager publicus* in approximately 20 acre allotments to poor Romans. After the Senate under the leadership of his own cousin Scipio Nasica refused to fund his commission and its expenses, Tiberius passed a second law, the *rogatio Sempronia de pecunia regis Attali*, to appropriate funds from the bequest of King Attalus III Philometer for his commission (*Plutarch Tib. Grac.* 13). While the Senate accepted his first

⁶⁰ Stockton 1979: ix.; Millar 2001: 22.

⁶¹ Stockton 1979: ix.

law as within his jurisdiction as tribune, Tiberius had subsumed in his second law too much of Senate's authority over foreign affairs. Facing the prospect of a second term, Scipio Nasica and a group of fellow Senators ambushed Tiberius and his followers, disposing of their bodies in the Tiber River (*App. Civ. Bel.* 1.17). Despite the death of Tiberius, his land reform commission lived on. Without the support of Senate, the commission unable to clear out the claims of Italian cities ran out of available *ager publicus* after 129 BCE.⁶² While his commission had resettled approximately 15,000 Romans after a survey of around 1268 square miles of land, the problem of *annona* remained too pressing to ignore.⁶³

In 123 BCE, tribune Gaius Gracchus, the brother of Tiberius, passed the *lex frumentaria*, the public grain distribution law, to little Senatorial opposition. Under the law, every resident citizen of Rome could buy some amount of subsidized wheat every month at a fixed price (*App. Civ. Bel.* 1.21). While the Senate complained about the law and questioned the motivations of Gaius, especially since the public distributions won Gaius the support of the plebeians, the Senate seems to have acquiesced to the proposal. In the first book of his *Civil Wars*, Appian offers no mention of a Senatorial backlash against Gaius and his *lex frumentaria*. In his later philosophical discourse, *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero recounts how one of the law's opponents, Senator L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, collected his allotment and when questioned replied *nolim mea bona, Gracche, tibi viritim dividere libeat, sed, si facias, partem petam*, "I would not wish that it pleases you to divide my goods man by man but if you would, I will seek my portion" (3.48). To give Senator Frugi his portion, Gaius had to legislate new taxes and tax collection reforms for the province of Asia.⁶⁴ Despite its acquiescence, the Senate soon made noise against Gaius.

⁶² Roselaar 2010: 241.

⁶³ For a full discussion of the success of Tiberius' land reform, see Roselaar 2010: 252-4.

⁶⁴ Stockton 1979: 128.

In 122 BCE, Gaius Gracchus pushed forward the *lex agraria*, the agricultural law, and the *lex Rubria*, the Rubrian law, causing a conflict with the Senate. Since Plutarch and Livy's epitomist only allude to the *lex agraria* in their accounts, while Appian offers no comment, scholar David Stockton speculates that the *lex agraria* would have empowered the land reform commission of Tiberius Gracchus to apportion the *ager publicus* outside of Italy for colonial cities and individuals.⁶⁵ Since his new colonial cities would have expanded the political power of Gaius beyond its base in the city of Rome, the Senate recruited his fellow tribune Lucius Drusus to counter his proposals. Drusus vetoed his *lex agraria*, gave the plebs rent-free public land, and offered the twelve new colonial cities (App. *Bel. Civ.* 1.23; Plut. *Vit. Cai. Grac.* 10). Thanks to Drusus's generosity, Gaius lost the majority of his supporters. When his fellow tribune Gaius Rubrus passed the *lex Rubria* to resettle the plain of Carthage with the new colonial city of Junonia, despite its historical and religious significance, Gaius Gracchus took leadership of the project after his selection by lot (App. *Bel. Civ.* 1.24). After Gaius surveyed site of the city and returned to Rome for 6000 settlers, the wolves demolished his survey markers. Given the religious significance of the site, Senate considered the wolves a bad omen and called an extraordinary meeting of the *comitia centuria* to repeal the *lex Rubria* (App. *Bel. Civ.* 1.24). In response, Gaius rallied his supporters to storm the Senate. After one of his band killed an innocent by-stander, his supporters abandoned Gaius. Before the agents of the Senate caught up with a fugitive Gaius, Gaius killed himself (App. *Bel. Civ.* 1.26). After the suicide of Gaius, the Senate faced no imminent serious threat to its authority over the *annona*.

Unthreatened by the *populares* for a generation, the Senate and the *optimates*, its conservative faction, rolled back the legislative achievements of the Gracchi brothers. In the immediate aftermath of Gaius' suicide, the tribunes of the plebs under the influence of the Senate

⁶⁵ Stockton 1979: 132.

undid the *lex agraria*, allowing for the sale of its land grants and for the dissolution of its commission (App. *Bel. Civ.* 1.27). Since Gaius' *lex frumentaria* had proved itself as a popular measure able to forestall more radical proposals like the *lex agraria*, the Senate and its agents were open to its continuation in some form. Due to its costs, the *optimates* sought to scale back the *lex frumentaria*. In 119 BCE, Gaius Marius as tribune of the plebs opposed an attempted expansion of the *lex frumentaria* to carry favor with the Senate's *optimates* (Plut. *Mar.* 4). Between 119 BCE and 100 BCE, Marcus Octavius replaced the *lex frumentaria* with his *lex Octavia* (Cic. *Brut.* 62.222).⁶⁶ Since Cicero praised the law for its comparative restraint in grain distributions, the *lex Octavia* appears to have cut eligibility, ration size, or ration price, through it is impossible to confirm. By 100 BCE, however, the *populares* returned to Roman politics.

In 100 CE, tribune Saturnius proposed a replacement *lex frumentaria*. Among its other lost provisions, his law would have reduced the price of the grain ration significantly from six and a third asses to five-sixth of an ass for three pounds of grain (Cic. *Ad Herenn.* 1.12). In response, the Senate empowered the two quaestors of year, Quintus Servilius Caepio and Lucius Calpurnius Piso, to counter Saturnius' proposal with additional grain purchases and distributions. To advertise their effort, Caepio and Piso minted coinage with the legend, *Ad Fru(mentum) Emu(ndum) ex s.c.*, "to purchase grain distributions by the decree of the Senate."⁶⁷ Having satisfied the moderate plebeians, the Senate ordered the consul Marius to arrest Saturnius. With the arrest of Saturnius, the Senate had stopped the *populares* and started a new ascendancy of the *optimates* for over a generation. By 81 BCE, in fact, the Senate had even repealed the *lex Octavia* and suspended its discount grain distributions.

⁶⁶ See Rickman 1980: 161-165 for his exhaustive attempt to account for the repeal of the *lex frumentaria*.

⁶⁷ Rickman 1980: 163.

In an attempt to placate the plebeians of Rome after the famine of 75 BCE, however, the Senate reformed the *annona*. Spurred by the Mithridatic Wars, provincial famine and piracy had pushed the price of food out of the budgets of poor plebeians in Rome.⁶⁸ In 75 BCE, an angry mob of hungry plebeians chased two consuls and a praetor from the forum (Sall. *Hist.* 2.45). In 74 BCE, the Senate expanded its oversight of the *annona*. The Senate appointed praetor Marcus Antonius, a former consul, in an extraordinary post with unlimited authority to chase down the pirates of Crete.⁶⁹ In 73 BCE, the consuls Marcus Terentius Varro Lucullus and Gaius Cassius Longinus with the approval of the Senate passed the *lex Terentia et Cassia frumentria*. Under this law, some part of the population regained the right to purchase an amount of grain at a fixed price, possibly the original Gracchan price of six and a third asses for three pounds.⁷⁰ To support the distributions, the law authorized the purchase of up to 3.8 million *modii* or 5700 hundred tons of grain from Sicily (Cic. *In Verr.* 4.30.72). Since Marcus Antonius and his successor Quintus Metellus could not clear the seas of piracy, even with their unlimited authority, the *lex Terentia et Cassia frumentria* failed to address the concerns of the plebeians. Out of this Senatorial failure, a new generation of *populares* saw their success.

Spurred by pirate attacks, the tribune Aulus Gabinus passed the *lex Gabinia* though the *consilium plebis* over the opposition of the Senate to give leadership over the anti-piratical campaign to Pompey. By 67 BCE, pirates harassed Ostia and the other major ports of Italy from their “territory” in the provinces (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 36.22). Controlling of the seas, pirates intercepted Rome’s imports of food and increased food prices. To remedy the situation, Aulus proposed the *lex Gabinia*. Under the law, the *consilium plebis* would elect from the ex-consuls a man to lead a large force against the pirates with supreme authority across the sea, on every

⁶⁸ Rickman 1980: 167.

⁶⁹ Garnsey 1988: 200.

⁷⁰ Rickman 1980: 166.

shore, and upto fifty miles inland (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 36.23). Since the law would take away the power of the Senate's agent, Quintus Metellus, and give it to the people's preferred champion, Pompey, the Senate opposed the law as before with the *lex agraria* of Gaius Gracchus. First, the Senate attempted to assassinate Gabinius in the Curia, the Senate house (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 36.24). When Gabinius escaped, a crowd of plebeians stormed the Curia in an attempt to avenge him. Like Gabinius, the Senate managed an escape. Second, the Senate attempted to recruit his fellow tribunes to obstruct the *lex Gabinia*. While Lucius Trebellius and Lucius Roscius did try, Gabinius with the help of the crowd intimidated them enough to overcome their protests (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 36.30). Unable to oppose, the Senate conceded to the *lex Gabinia*. On the first day of Pompey's appointment, the price of grain fell out of expectation (Cic. *Imp. Pomp.* 44); in three months, Pompey cleared the seas and settled the problem of the piracy with his resettlement of pirates.⁷¹ While Cato the Younger, the leader of the *optimates*, made one last desperate attempt in 62 BCE to forestall further usurpation of the Senatorial authority over the *annona* with a decree to expand eligibility for grain distributions, the *lex Gabinia* and its success marks the beginning of the end for the Senate's authority over the *annona*.

In 58 BCE, the tribune Publius Clodius Pulcher passed his *lex Clodia frumentaria* with little Senatorial opposition to subsume the entire Senatorial authority over the *annona* for his political benefit. Under the *lex Clodia frumentaria*, Clodius made public grain distributions free for the first time.⁷² To manage the *annona* and his distributions, Clodius appointed his agent Sextius Cloelius with absolute authority over the entire *annona* (Cic. *De Domo* 25). Despite his radical assumption of power, the Senate and its *optimates* offered little resistance. Following the

⁷¹ For his campaign, see de Souza 1999: 161-7.

⁷² Williamson 2005: 386.

Lex Clodia de rege Ptolemaeo et de insula Cypro publicando, “the Clodian Law about making the Ptolemaic Kingdom and the island Cyprus public property,” Cato the Younger, the leader of the *optimates*, had to administer the annexation of Cyprus from Ptolemaic Egypt and the sale of Ptolemaic property that year. Ironically, *optimatas* Cato’s collection of 7,000 talents funded the free distributions of *popularis* Clodius.⁷³ With his distributions, Clodius fed his political base of poor citizens and freedmen, winning their militant loyalty.⁷⁴ While Clodius had set the precedent for the future political employment of the *annona*, Clodius and his agent Sextius Cloelius proved unable to manage the *annona* themselves.

To weaken the power of Clodius and his inept agent Sextius Cloelius, the consuls Publius Cornelius Lentulus and Quintus Caecilius Metellus Nepos passed in 57 BCE through the *comitia tributa* the *Lex Cornelia Caecilia de cura annonae Cn. Pompeio mandanda*, “the Cornelian Caecilian Law concerning the care of the *annona* to be given to Pompey.” Within a year, Sextus Cloelius proved himself unable to manage the *annona*. When a new wave of rural migrants in search of free grain coincided with poor harvests, Sextus resorted to threats against *negotiatores*, grain merchants, and confiscations.⁷⁵ Without the *negotiatores*, the situation became a crisis. To attract the *negotiatores* back and fix the *annona*, Lentulus and Nepos passed a law through the *comitia tributa*, a third assembly under the consuls’ leadership with equivalent election rules to the *concilium plebis*.⁷⁶ Rather than dismantle free distributions or pass the mantle to a Senator, risking popular opposition, Lentulus and Nepos gave Pompey the anti-piratical champion of the people the *cura annonae*, care of the grain market, for five full years. While the *Lex Cornelia Caecilia* did not assign Pompey the same extraordinary power over the army, navy, and treasury

⁷³ Oost 1955: 104.

⁷⁴ Williamson 2005: 381.

⁷⁵ Rickman 1980: 173.

⁷⁶ Stockton 1979: ix.

as the *Lex Gabinia*, the law gave Pompey fifteen assistants and significant grants.⁷⁷ Over three years, Pompey and his agents created long-term contracts for the *annona*, gave citizenship to *negotiatores*, and eliminated the ineligible from the *frumentationes*.⁷⁸ Through his initiatives, Pompey fixed the *annona* for the next ten years, when the chaos of his civil war against Caesar undid his achievements.

After his civil war against Pompey, Julius Caesar made a series of reforms as dictator between 49 and 44 BCE to secure the *annona* for his plebeian supporters. While Caesar and Pompey had allied for their political agenda, Caesar fought against Pompey and the Senate after the Senate decreed the dissolution of his legions, disregarded the veto of the tribunes, and drove them away (Sue. *Div. Jul.* 30). After Caesar overcame Pompey and celebrated his victories with a series of generous grain and meat distributions, Caesar set upon himself the difficult task to reform the management of the *annona* (Sue. *Div. Jul.* 38). In the midst of a broader population increase, the number of public grain recipients jumped to 320,000 over the civil war (Sue. *Div. Jul.* 41; Cass. *Dio Rom. His.* 43.21). Employing a district by district survey, Caesar reduced the dole to a more manageable 150,000 people and tasked the praetors of the city with the maintenance of the recipient list. To ease the administration of the grain distributions and the *annona* under the aediles, Caesar appointed two new officials, the *aediles Cereales* (Cass. *Dio Rom. His.* 43.51). Likewise, Caesar resettled 80,000 citizens of Rome into overseas colonial settlements (Sue. *Div. Jul.* 42). While Caesar contemplated the creation of a Tiber River canal from Terracina to further ease shipment to harborless Ostia, his assassination in 44 BCE delayed the creation of an Ostian port for 88 years. In the next year, the Senate prohibited the creation of

⁷⁷ Rickman 1980: 55.

⁷⁸ Rickman 1980: 57-8.

another *cura annonae* in a vain attempt to stave off one man rule (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 45.17).
By then, however, it was too late.

I conclude that while the Senate and its elite fought enterprising politicians to maintain its traditional *annona* authority throughout the Roman Republic the Senate failed to achieve a successful system of *annona* administration. Given the wealth of its members, the Senate was slow to realize the issues of the *annona*. Even when the Senate realized the importance of food access for the plebeians, after the *populares* exploited public land and grain distributions for popularity, the Senate and its elites could not re-organize the management of the *annona* to accommodate the scale of Rome because of its internal divisions. Instead, Pompey and Caesar with their extraordinary powers reorganized the distribution of grain in the city of Rome. While the two addressed the issues of their day, neither created a long-term system to control the *annona*. In the Principate, however, Augustus and his successors created a new system out of the old order.

Reaping the Augustan Revolution: *Annona* and the Principate (27BCE-193CE)

In this chapter, I address the politics of *annona* and their evolution throughout the Principate (27BCE-235CE). Since the Julio-Claudian dynasty represents the most formative period for the politics of *annona* in the Principate, I will focus my account between the reigns of Augustus and Nero (27 BCE-68CE) with a summary of later developments (68CE-235CE). Furthermore, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio each offer a substantial account of the Julio-Claudian dynasty unlike later periods of the Principate.

Before I begin my account, I will offer the reader a brief overview. In the grain shortage of 23 BCE, Augustus attempted to support the traditional authority of the Senate on *annona* under the Republican guise of a personal *cura annonae* to prevent an overthrow of his constitutional settlement in 27 BCE. Since the Senate proved itself too weak to administer *annona*, Augustus again tried to support its authority with further imperial aid, offices, and reforms in 18 BCE. Augustus, however, ceased his attempts to strengthen the Senate's authority over *annona* with imperial aid after the food shortage of 6 CE. Following his attempt in 7 CE to regulate the *annona* with two ex-consuls, Augustus created the imperial office of the *praefectus annonae*. Despite his initial attempt to "republicanize" the *annona*, Tiberius failed to undo the administrative reforms of Augustus. To remedy the reckless disregard of Caligula's reign, Claudius expanded the role of the emperor and his officials with his assumption of the Senate's taxation and port authority. To secure his own political support, Nero subsumed the Senate's authority over the public distributions. After Nero's mismanagement of *annona* contributed to his fall, the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE) continued the *annona* without any radical changes. Despite Nerva's "republicanizing" reforms, the Antonine dynasty of emperors (98-192 CE)

expanded the *annona* to augment their popular support. I conclude that over the course of the Principate the emperors subsumed control of the *annona* from the Senate.

In the shortage of 23 BCE, Augustus attempted to support the traditional authority of the Senate on *annona* under the Republican guise of a personal *cura annonae* to prevent an overthrow of his constitutional settlement in 27 BCE. After his victory at Actium in 31 BCE, Augustus became the hegemon of the Roman world with unprecedented control over his force of around 200,000 men and his Egyptian fortune.⁷⁹ Over his civil wars, Augustus had destroyed any organized opposition to his hegemony, whether from the faction of Cassius and Brutus, from that of Marcus Antonius, or from that of Sextus Pompeius, killing the leaders and co-opting the followers (Sue. *Div. Aug.* 9). Without political opposition, Augustus reorganized the Roman polity over three years as a consul. In the process, Augustus rescinded his unconstitutional laws of the civil wars, expelled unworthy men from the Senate, and ultimately redistributed wealth to the remaining Senators (Cass. Dio *His. Rom.* 52. 42 and 53.2). Augustus could very well achieve his agenda whether for his personal safety or for political vision.⁸⁰ His efforts culminated in the constitutional settlement of 27 BCE. While Augustus retained supervision of the border provinces and their armies, Augustus returned the interior provinces to the popular governance of the people (53.12). While Cassius Dio recorded no action about *annona* in his constitutional settlement, I infer that the *annona* would have reverted to the Senate and its agents, the *aediles*

⁷⁹ See Raaflaub 2009: 203-228 for Augustus' army and its political significance.

⁸⁰ Each of the three major imperial historians offer their own interpretation of Augustus's political intentions. In his *Divus Augustus*, Suetonius interprets that Augustus desired to restore the republic but decided against a restoration, fearing for his and the state's safety (28). In his *Romana Historia*, Cassius Dio interprets Augustus in a similar manner, although Augustus makes his decision for his own safety after a conversation with Maecenas and Agrippa (52.1). In his *Annales*, Tacitus portrays Augustus as the corruptor of the Roman Republic, who *ubi militem donis, populum annona, cunctos dulcedine otii pellexit, insurgere paulatim, munia senatus magistratuum legum in se trahere, nullo adversante*, "when he enticed the army with gifts, the people with *annona*, and all with the sweetness of idleness, he grew powerful little by little, while he drew into himself the offices of the Senate, of the magistrates, and the laws, with no one as an adversary" (2). Since Suetonius as imperial secretary could access the imperial archives and the private papers of Augustus, I would trust Suetonius' account over Tacitus' or Cassius Dio's. By either interpretation, Augustus would desire to implement the same policies.

cereales, since Augustus assigned the Senate all the major grain provinces except Egypt, a minor source at the time. No matter what Augustus had planned in 27 BCE, fortune would compel his plans to change.

After the Tiber River flooded away Rome's reserves of grain in 24 BCE, Augustus attempted to support the traditional authority of Senate. Cassius Dio offers the sole account of the supply crisis of 24 BCE:

τῷ δ' ἐπιγιγνομένῳ ἔτει, ἐν ᾧ Μάρκος τε Μάρκελλος καὶ Λούκιος Ἀρρουντίος ὑπάτευσαν, ἢ τε πόλις πελαγίσαντος αὐθις τοῦ ποταμοῦ ἐπλεύσθη, καὶ κεραυνοῖς ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἐβλήθη καὶ οἱ ἀνδριάντες οἱ ἐν τῷ Πανθείῳ, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δόρυ ἐκ τῆς τοῦ Ἀυγούστου χειρὸς ἐκπεσεῖν. πονούμενοι οὖν ὑπὸ τε τῆς νόσου καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ λιμοῦ ἔν τε γὰρ τῇ Ἰταλίᾳ πάση ὁ λοιμὸς ἐγένετο καὶ τὴν χώραν οὐδεὶς εἰργάσατο: δοκῶ δ' ὅτι καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἔξω χωρίοις τὸ αὐτὸ τοῦτο συνηχέθη νομίσαντες οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι οὐκ ἄλλως σφίσι ταῦτα συμβεβηκέναι, ἀλλ' ὅτι μὴ καὶ τότε ὑπατεύοντα (54.1).

“But with the year coming in which Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius were consuls, the city was submerged when the Tiber river flooded again. But both many things and statues which were in the Pantheon were stuck by lightning, so that the spear even fell from the hand of Augustus. Being affected therefore both by disease and famine, for in the whole of Italy the disease spread and no one worked the land and I think that in the lands beyond the same thing spread, the Romans concurred believing that it happened for no other reason to them but that Augustus was not consul at that time.”

Given the circumstances, it is probable that the Tiber's flood and its destruction of grain reserves caused the crisis rather than the disease.⁸¹ Whatever the cause of the crisis, the people responded with violent demands for Augustus to assume the dictatorship and the *cura annonae*. According to Cassius Dio, the people even threatened to burn down the Curia and the senate (Cass. Dio.

⁸¹ While an epidemic of disease would undoubtedly break out after a flood in Augustan Rome, with its streets full of refuse and remains, the epidemic would have a limited effect on agricultural production. By this period, Rome imported the majority of its grain supply from outside of Italy, the epicenter of the epidemic. While Cassius Dio speculates that the epidemic spread beyond Italy, the floods would have disrupted the river port of Ostia enough to prevent the spread of the epidemic over sea, mitigating its effect on the overseas grain provinces. For a full assessment of the flood risk to Rome, see the Aldrete 2006: 133-141.

His. Rom. 54.1). Popular outcry therefore crushed Augustus' attempt to restore the authority of the Senate.

Remembering this threat to his constitutional settlement, Augustus records his response in his *Res Gestae*:

Dictaturam et apsentem et praesentem mihi delatam et a populo et a senatu, M. Marcello et L. Arruntio consulibus non accepi. Non recusavi in summa frumenti penuria curationem annonae, quam ita administravi, ut intra paucos dies metu et periculo praesentis populi universum liberarem impensa et cura mea (15).

In the consulship of Marcus Marcellus and Lucius Arruntius [23 BCE], I did not accept the dictatorship offered to me both absent and present by both the people and Senate. I did not refuse in the greatest scarcity of food the care of grain, which I so administered that I freed the whole people from the present fear and danger by my expenditure and concern.

Since the dictatorship of Julius Caesar, who was killed twenty years prior, would have lived in popular memory, Augustus' acceptance of the dictatorship would signal his insincerity in the constitutional settlement of 27 BCE. Augustus would then become less able to continue the "republicanizing" reforms necessary to accomplish his goals. By contrast, Augustus could save his constitutional settlement from popular pressure if he accepted the *cura annonae*. Augustus could point to Pompey's *cura annonae* in 67 BCE as a republican precedent for his temporary *cura* (Cass. Dio. *His. Rom.* 54.1). Accepting the *cura annonae*, Augustus purchased and distributed some twelve rations of grain with the help of his successor, Tiberius, to ease the immediate crisis.⁸² Furthermore, Augustus ordered that the Senate choose two people among former praetors to oversee the distribution of grain (Cass. Dio. *His. Rom.* 54.1). Despite his best efforts to pass the *annona* to the Senate, Augustus found *annona* back in his court.

Since the Senate proved itself too weak to administer *annona*, Augustus again attempted to support its authority with further imperial aid and reforms in 18 BCE. While none of the three

⁸² Garnsey 1988: 219.

imperial historians record popular unrest in 18 BCE, Augustus appears to act to counter a potential food crisis from shortfalls of tax grain. As Augustus records in his *Res Gestae*:

Inde ab eo anno, quo Cn. et P. Lentuli consules fuerunt, cum deficerent vectigalia, tum centum millibus hominum tum pluribus multo frumentarias et nummarias tesseras ex aere et patrimonio meo dedi (18).

From that year, in which Gnaeus and Publius Lentulus were consuls onwards, whenever the taxes were deficient, I gave out of my granary and patrimony grain and money tickets sometimes to one-hundred thousand men, sometimes to many more.

Beyond short-term imperial aid, Augustus made several long-term reforms. Augustus increased the quantity and quality of the ex-*praetor* assistants for grain distribution, choosing four recent ex-*praetors* instead of two somewhat recent ex-*praetors* (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 54.17). To support the work of *praefecti frumenti dandi ex s.c.*, as the ex-*praetors* would come to be known, Augustus established other new offices to maintain infrastructure necessary for the *annona*: the public buildings of Rome and the Tiber river channel (Suet. *Div. Aug.* 37).⁸³ Around this time, Augustus experimented with a different method of distribution to ease the logistics of the *annona*. Rather than hand out grain month by month, Augustus attempted to give four months of grain thrice per year.⁸⁴ On the demand of the people, however, Augustus returned to the previous practice (Suet. *Div. Aug.* 40).⁸⁵ Although unable to change the distribution of *annona*, Augustus was able to return authority to the Senate until the crisis of 6 CE.

After the crisis of 6 CE, Augustus gave up on his attempts to strengthen the Senate's authority over *annona* with imperial aid. In the later months of 5 CE, the Tiber River again flooded away part of Rome's grain reserves, spoiling them with rot (Cass. Dio 55.22). Since

⁸³ For the evolution of titles for these ex-*praetor* grain officials, see Rickman 1980:180.

⁸⁴ Suetonius explains that Augustus sought to reduce the disruption of grain distribution on the business of the plebs. Even if Augustus offered this explanation in public, Augustus would have considered in private its logistical effects on grain distribution after the crisis of 23 BCE. With fewer distributions, the Senate could schedule the *annona* distributions around the major shipments of grain.

⁸⁵ Since the reform of Augustus would have meant that a pleb had to carry 60 pounds of wheat instead of 15 round the streets of Rome to their apartments, one can understand the popular desire for monthly distributions.

Cassius Dio offers no further comment, the Senate and its agents, *praefecti frumenti dandi ex s.c.*, seem to have managed the crisis of 5 CE without any complications. Despite its show of strength in 5 CE, the Senate would prove unable to handle the severe supply crisis of 6 CE due to insufficient tax revenue.⁸⁶ Inflamed by major urban fires and by new taxation, the Roman people pondered revolution by day and published revolutionary bulletins by night as the crisis deepened (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 55.27). In this turbulent time, Augustus responded with radical acts:

ὥσθ' ὑπ' αὐτοῦ τούς τε μονομαχοῦντας καὶ τὰ ἀνδράποδα τὰ ὄνια ὑπὲρ πενήκοντα καὶ ἑπτακοσίους σταδίους ἐξωσθῆναι, ἕκ τε τῆς θεραπείας καὶ τὸν Αὐγουστον καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τὸ πλεῖον ἀποπέμψασθαι, καὶ δικῶν ἀνοχὰς γενέσθαι, ἐκδημεῖν τε τοῖς βουλευταῖς ἔνθα ἂν ἐθελήσωσιν ἐπιτραπῆναι. καὶ ὅπως γ' ἂν μηδὲν ἐκ τούτου τὰ δόγματα ἐμποδίζηται, κύρια πάντα τὰ γινωσκόμενα ὑπὸ τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων εἶναι ἐκελεύσθη. καὶ προσέτι καὶ ἄνδρες ὑπατευκότες ἐπὶ τε τοῦ σίτου καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ ἄρτου κατέστησαν, ὥστε τακτὸν ἐκάστῳ πιπράσκεσθαι. ἐπέδωκε μὲν γὰρ καὶ προῖκα ὁ Αὐγουστος τοῖς σιτοδοτούμενοις τοσοῦτον ἕτερον ὅσον αἰεὶ ἐλάμβανον: ὡς δ' οὐδὲ ἐκεῖνό σφισιν ἐξήρκεσεν, οὐδὲ ἐς τὰ ἑαυτοῦ γενέθλια δημοσίᾳ αὐτοὺς ἐστιαθῆναι εἶασεν (55.26).

As a consequence, the gladiators and the slaves for sale were forced out seven-hundred and fifty stades [around 86.18 miles]. Augustus and the other men sent away from themselves the greater part of their retinues. There was also a recess of courts. Augustus and the others were willing then to permit even for senators to be abroad, and so that no one out of this might impede public legislation, it was ordered that all the judgements of the men always present were valid. And besides Augustus and the others appointed ex-consuls over the grain and bread supply as to sell a fixed quantity to each. Augustus indeed contributed as a gift to the men being provisioned so much in every case as they had received. But since it did not suffice for them, he did not even allow public feasts to be held on his birthday.⁸⁷

After Augustus had invested over thirty years of his reign to restore the institutions of Rome, the courts, the markets, and the Senate, he sacrificed all of them to alleviate the grain crisis of 6 CE.

⁸⁶ Since Cassius Dio names no cause for the new crisis, I would assume insufficient tax revenue from the provinces. After the severe flood of 5 CE, a second severe flood seems unlikely. While Cassius Dio mentions a fire in the same year, the design of the *horreae* or storehouses would make them fire-resistant. For more on *horreae* design, see Rickman 1977: 117-122.

⁸⁷ Compare to Suetonius *Div. Aug.* 42.3. Suetonius adds the expulsion of foreigners.

Even if Augustus would revoke his radical actions in the spring of 7 CE, the crisis of 6 CE represents the seed of his future *annona* policy. As Suetonius records in his *Divus Augustus*, Augustus expressed in a lost work how after the crisis:

Impetum se cepisse scribit frumentationes publicas in perpetuum abolendi, quod earum fiducia cultura agrorum cessaret; neque tamen perseverasse, quia certum haberet posse per ambitionem quandoque restitui (42)

An urge for abolishing the public distributions in perpetuity seized me, because for the trust in them the cultivation of the fields ceased. I did not however persist because I thought that the public distributions are certain to be able to be revived at any time through a desire for popular favor.

Even if Augustus could not recognize how the merchants rather than the farmers suffered the primary impact of his previous policy, his recognition transformed his public policy around *annona*.⁸⁸ Augustus no longer “bailed out” the Senate and its public grain distributions with imperial aid as in 23 and 18 BCE.⁸⁹ Augustus instead regulated *annona* and its public distributions not only for the customers but for the producers (Sue. *Div. Aug.* 42). In the process of this public initiative, Augustus consolidated more power into his private hands.

Despite his radical acts of 6 CE, Rome fell again into the supply crisis of 7 CE, spurring Augustus to a permanent solution. To satisfy the still restive populace, Augustus appointed two

⁸⁸ By 6 CE, if a farmer was close enough to Rome to sell his produce there himself, the farmer would have grown fruit or other non-transportable commodities to take advantage of high urban prices (Morely 1996: 83-107). Other farmers would only experience the impact of public grain distributions and its downward pressure on the grain price of Rome indirectly through the *negotiatores* or the private grain merchants. As Augustus distributed free grain, he reduced the potential profits of the *negotiatores* from high prices. Erdkamp 2005: 148-150.

⁸⁹ In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus mentions no personal contributions to the state or its people after his donation to the *aerarium militare*, the military treasury, in 6 CE. While Cassius Dio shares the silence of Augustus, he adds several notes about new taxation necessary to replace his previous personal contributions. See 55.24 for how Augustus passed his five percent estate tax in 6 CE, 55.31 for how he got his two percent slave sales tax in 8 CE, and 56.28 for how Augustus imposed a five percent property tax after the Senate protested his estate tax in 13 CE. To justify his taxation, Augustus of course pointed to the cost of his old soldiers and new security forces. While these arguments from silence cannot be conclusive, the silence is suggestive, especially in the *Res Gestae*. Since Augustus attempts to establish a narrative for his reign, how Augustus and his service to the Republic makes his reign an *exemplum* for the future, Augustus would desire to mention any gift to the Roman people to magnify his virtue of *liberalitas*. For an excellent summary of the purpose and context of the *Res Gestae*, see Harrison 2013: 4-12. For its Republican idiom, see Hodgson 2014.

ex-consuls curators of the grain supply (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 55.31). Using their lictors and the broad authority, the curators seem to have stabilized the *annona* of Rome, even if not quite for Italy.⁹⁰ Despite the short-term success of the curators, Augustus, who was now over seventy years old, sought a solution for the *annona* able to survive his death. Sometime between 9 and 11 CE, Augustus appointed the equestrian Gaius Turranius the first permanent imperial *praefectus annonae*.⁹¹ Until the third century CE, the *praefectus annonae* and his staff would maintain the de facto *cura annonae* of the emperors on their behalf, working with a web of public and private agents to ensure the *annona*.⁹² In the process, the *praefectus* created market regulations, judged legal cases, and traded the emperor's personal grain supply.⁹³ After the death of Augustus, the *praefectus annonae* became part of Tiberius' imperial inheritance.

Despite his initial attempt to “republicanize” the *annona*, Tiberius continued the *praefectus annonae* and the legacy of Augustus. Once Tiberius secured his reign against its major threats in 16 CE, Tiberius tried to return his authority over the *annona* to the Senate in his broader restoration of “Republican” norms.⁹⁴ When Tiberius restored the sumptuary laws of the Republic to combat excessive expenditures, *censuit annonamque macelli senatus arbitratu*

⁹⁰ In 9 CE, Cassius Dio explains that a food crisis occurred within Italy because of the war against the Dalmatians. Given the geography of the region and its impact on commerce, the effects of the war would concentrate in the Po River Valley and the rest of eastern Italy. Both eastern Italy and Dalmatia (modern Croatia) rest along the Adriatic Sea. Since the Adriatic Sea as a narrow, shallow gulf offered harsh conditions to ships with few safe harbors, few outside grain merchants would have imported grain into the region, even when the presence of the Roman army increased demand for grain (Erdkamp 2005: 188). Without imports, the Roman army and its procurement would have decreased supplies and increased prices to crisis levels. Contrary to the suggestion of Peter Garnsey, the consumers of Rome would have suffered minimal effects from the campaign against the Dalmatians and the Germans (Garnsey 1988: 222).

⁹¹ Since Cassius Dio's narrative breaks down between 9 and 11 CE, Peter Garnsey presumes that the missing sections would include an explication of the first *praefectus annonae*'s appointment (Garnsey 1988: 222). In 14 CE, Tacitus after all explains how the Gaius Turranius and his fellow prefect Seius Strabo pledged their loyalty to Tiberius in the presence of consuls Sextus Pompeius and Sextus Apuleius (*Ann.* 1.7).

⁹² Rickman 1980: 92-3.

⁹³ Rickman 1980: 80-2.

⁹⁴ Suetonius records his operations against the mutinies of his German and Illyrian soldiers, the conspiracy of Senator Lucius Scribonius Libo, and the revolt of Clemens (*Tib.* 25)

quotannis temperandam, dato aedilibus negotio popinas ganeasque usque eo inhibendi, ut ne opera quidem pistoria proponi venalia sinerent (Sue. Tib. 34), “[Tiberius] proposed that *annona* should be checked every year by the decision of the Senate, with the duty given to the aediles for prohibiting the cook shops and eating-houses always from that time not to allow pastries to be exposed for sale.”⁹⁵ In the face of crisis, however, Tiberius held to his Augustan legacy of imperial control. When the people protested high prices in 19 CE, Tiberius imposed a maximum price on the *annona* subsidizing merchants 2 sesterces per modii (Tac. *Ann.* 2.87). His subsidy reflects his post-Augustan awareness of the need to make the grain trade worthwhile. When the people protested high prices in 32 CE, however, Tiberius critiqued the magistrates and the Senate for their inability to control the protestors rather than the *annona* (Tac. *Ann.* 6.13). Moreover, the implementation of their decisions remained in the hands of the emperor and his *praefectus annonae*. Curiously, the original *praefectus*, the equestrian Gaius Turranius, would serve until 48 CE, when Claudius forced an unhappy ninety year Turranius into his retirement (Tac. *Ann.* 11.31; Sen. *De Brev. Vi.* 18).⁹⁶ Unlike Claudius, Tiberius’s successor Caligula was happy to let Turranius manage the *annona*.

In spite of Turranius’ involvement, Caligula almost caused a complete disruption of *annona* with his reckless requisitions of its public and private infrastructure. Since Caligula wished for a famine or another fine disaster to make his reign unforgettable, according to Suetonius, Caligula was apt to misappropriate the infrastructure of the *annona* for his own amusement (*Cal.* 31). In two years of his reign, Caligula squandered thrifty Tiberius’ 2.3 to 3.3 billion sesterces surplus on his pet projects (Cass. Dio *His. Rom.* 2). Unwilling to curtail his projects, Caligula terrorized Rome in his effort to cut ordinary costs and to raise extraordinary

⁹⁵ For the Republican heritage of sumptuary laws, see Dari-Mattiacci and Pliseck: 2010.

⁹⁶ Turranius was so unhappy to retire Seneca reports that his whole household wept for him until Claudius restored Turranius to his post.

revenue. When Caligula wished to control his ordinary cost for public grain, he closed the granaries on occasion without concern for the people (Sue. *Cal.* 26). Similarly, Caligula seized the work animals from the bakers once when he sought to sell the memorabilia of Augustus and Tiberius to the people of Gaul (Sue. *Cal.* 39). Using his hard-conned funds, Caligula in the third year of his reign (39 CE) even bridged 3.3 miles of the Bay of Naples with a double band of merchant ships, out-aggrandizing Xerxes and his Hellespont bridge (Sue. *Cal.* 19; Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 59.17). Between all of the disruptions, tenacious Turranius could scarcely sustain the *annona*. As Seneca suggests, Rome only possessed seven or eight days of provisions on the eve of Caligula's death in January of 41 CE (*De Brev. Vi.* 18). After four years of Caligula's regime, a crisis would compel his successor, Claudius, to intervene into the *annona* further.

To restore the *annona* after the reckless reign of Caligula, Claudius subsumed authority over the port of Ostia and the taxation code to himself and his officials. When Caligula appropriated their ships for his bridge in 39 CE, he reduced the number of *negotiatores* on the *annona*. In his appropriation, Caligula removed around 290 ships from the *annona* and from other trades.⁹⁷ Beyond the initial reduction, Caligula's action discouraged other *negotiatores* from the *annona*, since Caligula had made the trade more risky with the new possibility of political seizure. With fewer *negotiatores*, Claudius faced a severe food crisis in 42 CE. To remedy the crisis in the short-run, Claudius subsidized winter-voyages for the remaining *negotiatores*; in the longer-run, Claudius constructed the *Portus* of Ostia at great expense (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 60.11).⁹⁸ With the *Portus*, Claudius created the first harbor for the city of Rome.

⁹⁷ Assuming an average ship length of 120 feet, Caligula would have removed 290 ships for his two rows of ships. From Cassius Dio's description, however, Caligula constructed some of the ships for the occasion so Caligula might have removed fewer ships from the fleet (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 59.17). To give some context, modern archaeologists have only discovered around 190 shipwrecks from the 1st century CE (Parker 2008: 187)

⁹⁸ Cassius Dio records a food crisis in 42 CE unparalleled in Suetonius. In his account, Cassius Dio fails to mention any short-term response to the crisis of 42 CE. Given the necessity to relieve the short-term crisis, Peter Garnsey

Since Rome could offer the *negotiatores* a safer anchorage than the river mouth of Ostia with less risk to storm loss, Claudius could attract more *negotiatores* to supply the *annona*, especially in the winter. In 44 CE, Claudius subsumed the authority of Senate over the port of Ostia to little protest, replacing its appointee the *quaestor Ostiensis* with his own *procurator annonae* (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 60.24).⁹⁹ Despite his new authority over Ostia, Claudius required still more authority to respond to the crisis of 51 CE.

In the food crisis of 51 CE, Claudius subsumed tax authority from the Senate to attract more *negotiatores*. Since the provincial droughts of 51 CE had prevented the *negotiatores* from the procurement of enough grain for the entire year, Rome possessed only some fifteen days' worth of grain in the middle of winter (Sue. *Div. Claud.* 13; Tac. *Ann.* 12.43). In Book 12 of his *Annales*, Tacitus records the popular response: *nec occulti tantum questus, sed iura reddentem Claudium circumvasere clamoribus turbidis, pulsumque in extremam fori partem vi urgebant, donec militum globo infensos perripit*, "And the complaints were not hidden, but the people beset Claudius on all sides with a confused clamor while he administered justice and were pushing him beaten into a far part of the forum with violence until he broke through the hostile men with a sphere of soldiers" (43). Given his fright, Claudius sought to stabilize the *annona* with more grain by any means necessary. Since his second major infrastructure project to drain the Fucine Lake failed, Claudius would not attempt another (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 60.11). Lacking the desire (or the ability) to create and operate his own merchant ships, Claudius subsidized the *negotiatores* to supply the *annona* in response to the immediate crisis and afterwards. Immediately, Claudius assumed any loss from winter voyages of *negotiatores* in the

assumes that Claudius relieved the crisis in the manner of 51 CE (Garnsey 1988: 223). Without the *Portus*, however, Claudius would have found the arrangement of winter shipments difficult, since according to Cassius Dio's comment the winter storms would have wrecked ships outside of Rome. In spite of this, I believe Garnsey's assumption the best available.

⁹⁹ See Rickman 1980:222 for more information about the administration of Ostia and *Portus*.

annona trade (Sue. *Div. Claud.* 19). While his effort stimulated trade in the short-run, the policy proved too expensive to sustain in the long-run as the *negotiatores* took advantage of the subsidy to sink their old ships for the “insurance money.” Instead, Claudius would give out tax exemptions and other special rights to every person with a merchant ship (Sue. *Div. Claud.* 19). Male citizens could avoid the “bachelor penalty” of the *lex Papia Poppaea*; females the traditional limitations on inheritance. Since Claudius consulted the Senate on none of these measures, Claudius assumed the traditional Senatorial authority over taxation.

Over his fourteen year reign, Nero would subsume any remaining authority of the Senate over the *annona*. During his tax reforms in 58 CE, Nero would continue to subsume the tax authority of Senate for the promotion of *annona*. In addition to their previous privileges, Nero allowed *negotiatores* to exclude their merchant ships from their taxable property (Tac. *Ann.* 13.51). Given the tax exemption, enough people invested in new merchant ships to reduce the price of shipments across the marine provinces. Despite the success of his tax reforms, Nero found himself in the midst of a potential supply crisis in 62 CE. In the fire and the storm that year, Rome lost three hundred grain ships. Due to anxiety over the Parthian War, Nero would have faced a popular revolt had not he in a false confidence tossed moldy public grain reserves into the Tiber (Tac. *Ann.* 15.18). Even if only Tacitus of the three major historians tells this tall tale, where an imperial trick can disappear the destruction of 300 ships and its effects on the *annona*, his account suggests the increase of imperial influence, even over the distributions.¹⁰⁰

After the Great Fire of 64 CE, however, Nero would burn away the rest of the Senate’s *annona* authority. In this inferno, the city of Rome suffered a disaster unparalleled since the floods and famines of 6 CE. As Suetonius describes, *per sex dies septemque noctes ea clade saevitum est ad monumentorum bustorumque deversoria plebe compulsa* (Nero 38), “For six

¹⁰⁰ Garnsey 1988:223.

days and seven nights the city was raged with this destruction, while the people were driven to the lodgings of monuments and tombs.” While Augustus responded to his crisis with the temporary appointment of an extraordinary commission of ex-consuls, Nero assumed emergency control for himself and his officials over the *annona*. To maintain his maximum grain price of 3 sesterces per *modius*, Nero expedited grain shipments from the granaries of Ostia and Puteoli. In addition, Tacitus reports that Nero also suspended the free public grain distributions of the *annona* for the first time in the Principate (Tac. *Ann.* 15.39). In 64-66 CE, Nero would advertise his personal control over the *annona* with his issues of the Annona-Ceres sesterius.¹⁰¹ While a special shipment of grain from the province of Moesia ended the immediate crisis of 64 CE, Nero held on to his emergency powers.

From 64 to 68 CE, Nero employed his power over the *annona* to secure his weakening political support. In 65 CE, Nero put down the Pisonian Conspiracy. According to Tacitus, influential senator Gaius Calpurnius Piso conspired with Praetorian Prefect Faenius Rufus to become emperor with the help of the Praetorian Guard (*Ann.* 15.50).¹⁰² Since Nero saw the need to buy the loyalty of the Praetorian Guard, Nero granted each praetorian guardsmen two thousand sesterces and free public grain distributions each month (Tac. *Ann.* 15.72; Sue. *Nero* 10). In 64 CE, Nero endeavored to ease navigation to Rome with one or the other canal projects. In Suetonius’ account, Nero only “intended,” *destinarat*., to construct a series of short canals to cut through the bends of the Tiber River channel (*Nero* 16). In Tacitus’ account, however, Nero and his engineers attempted to construct a more than 100 mile canal overland between Lake Avernus and Ostia in their hubris (*Ann.* 15.42). In spite of Nero’s love of the impossible, Tacitus reports how Nero abandoned the project after a few initial canal works. Whichever canal project

¹⁰¹ Rickman 1980: 261.

¹⁰² For a detailed analysis of the Pisonian Conspiracy and Tacitus’ narrative, see Pagan 2004: 76-89.

Nero attempted to advance, his consideration of expensive canals reflects his concern for the *annona* and for his popular support.

Despite his earlier efforts, Nero alienated his popular support with his mismanagement of the *annona*. In 68 CE, Senator Vindex of Gaul started a rebellion against Nero to stop his plunder of Gaul for his plays and other pet projects (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 63.22; Sue. *Nero* 40). When Galba and his Spanish legions joined the rebellion, Nero faced one of the most serious rebellions in the history of the Principate. Even if Nero had paid no attention to rebellion at first, since Nero preferred to speak to the Senate about his nifty new water organ, the desertion of Rubrius Gallus and his *Legio I Italica*, First Italian Legion, made Nero panic about his previous preparations (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 63.27; Sue. *Nero* 41). After Nero attempted unsuccessfully to mobilize the Roman citizenry, Nero drafted the slaves of the wealthy and demanded contributions of everyone (Sue. *Nero* 44). Distracted by war collections, Nero neglected to manage the *annona*. As Suetonius recounts, *Ex annonae quoque caritate lucranti adcrevit invidia; nam et forte accidit, ut in publica fame Alexandrina navis nuntiaretur pulverem luctatoribus aulicis advexisse* (Nero 45), “Out of the dearness of *annona*, hatred arose for the profiteer; for it even perhaps happened that in a public famine a ship from Alexandria was said to carry dust for the imperial wrestlers.”¹⁰³ As scholar Gwyn Morgan explains, since Nero purchased grain to feed his soldiers in his preparations against Galba too fast, Nero created a dearth of grain on the market.¹⁰⁴ When fewer people than expected joined his army, Nero sold some of his surplus grain to the public for high prices. Nero thereby gained some coin but lost any support from the plebeians. Seeing Nero’s loss of popular and military support, the Senate shifted its support to Galba (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 63.27; Sue. *Nero* 49). With the help of his sole

¹⁰³ Curiously, Cassius Dio does not recount this story in his shortened account of the fall of Nero. Even so, Suetonius’ account remains believable since Cassius Dio seems to follow Suetonius’ account in other respects.

¹⁰⁴ Morgan 2000: 222.

friend, his secretary Epaphroditus, Nero killed himself. The death of Nero dispelled any illusion of the emperors about the political importance of the *annona*.

After the conservative management of the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE), the emperors of the later Principate (96-235 CE) would expand the *annona* to augment their popular support. In 69 CE, Vespasian vaporized his opposition to become the first emperor of the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE). Given the silence of the literary record about the *annona*, Vespasian and Titus seem to have made the *annona* work without major new measures, even despite the disruptions of Mount Vesuvius's eruption in 79 CE and the Roman fire of 80 CE (Sue. *Div. Titus* 8; Cass. Dio *Rom His.* 21-4).¹⁰⁵ Thanks to the confiscations of Nero, Vespasian and Titus controlled an even more substantial portion of grain production in North Africa and Egypt through the *patrimonium imperii*, reducing their dependence on the *negotiatores*.¹⁰⁶ After the rebellion of Lucius Antonius in 89 CE, however, Domitian experienced the first shortage of grain in the Flavian dynasty (Sue. *Dom.* 7). While Domitian had declared an edict to prohibit the creation of new vineyards in Italy and to uproot half of the provincial vineyards, popular criticism caused Domitian to prune back his plans (Sue. *Dom.* 7 and 14). Even if Domitian did restore the customary public banquets of Claudius instead of the gift baskets of Nero, *sportula*, to woo the people, Domitian seems

¹⁰⁵ While Emperor Titus had bad enough luck to suffer two major disasters, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and of a Roman fire, both disasters could have caused far worse impacts to *annona*. For Mount Vesuvius, had the wind blown northwest to Puteoli instead of southeast toward Pompeii, the ash of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius would have destroyed the year's grain ships from Alexandria and North Africa. Despite the *Portus'* construction in 42 CE, the larger Alexandrian and North African vessels still docked in Puteoli for its safer harbor (Rickman 1980: 19). Since Mount Vesuvius erupted during the March-October shipping season, on August 24th, some ships would be in harbor, including North African grain vessels. Had the fire of 80 CE headed to the Emporium district, the location of the *horrae*, instead of the Capitoline Hill and the Campus Martius. Despite his luck, it is hard to conceive that Titus and his urban authorities did not impose some emergency market controls to stop the supply hoarding (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 23).

¹⁰⁶ According to Pliny the Younger, Nero acquired half of the land through his confiscation of six large Senatorial estates (Pliny *Nat. His.* 18.35). Even if Pliny the Younger exaggerates, Rickman notes how an inscription of Hadrian cites the expansion of *saltus Neronianus*, the Neroian plain, from multiple earlier estates (Rickman 1980: 111). While less dramatic than in North Africa, Nero consolidated imperial lands in Egypt. For a full account, see Parassoglou 1978.

otherwise to have maintained the *annona* arrangements of his successors. While the *annona* of the Flavians satisfied the Roman people, the next dynasty of emperors were hungry for reforms.

After Nerva's "republicanizing" reforms, the Antonine dynasty of emperors (98-192 CE) expanded the *annona* to augment their popular support. In his short reign (96-98 CE), Nerva attempted once more to "republicanize" the administration of the Principate. Nerva restored the Senate's power and property after the seizures of Domitian (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 67.2). Given his republican leanings, Nerva sought to reduce the influence of the emperor and his control of the *annona*. Nerva therefore worked with the Senate to resettle poor Romans across Italy on 60 million sesterces of land, following the precedent of the Gracchi brothers and Julius Caesar (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 67.2). After the mutiny of Casperius Aelianus and his Praetorian Guardsmen in 98 CE, Nerva appointed Trajan as his successor. With Trajan, a new era of *annona* would dawn.

Unlike Nerva, the Antonines expanded the control of the emperor over the *annona* to secure public support in Italy and the provinces. Since the high price of bread concerned the people, Trajan increased public supervision of the bakers and millers, organizing them into a guild, the *corpus pistorum*, for the first time.¹⁰⁷ Using the *corpus pistorum*, Trajan and his successors could better direct subsidies and privileges toward bakers. To gain the goodwill of the people, Trajan granted grain to 5,000 boys among the cities of Italy. Later Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius would create similar programs to feed the boys and girls of Italy (Cass. Dio *Rom. His.* 68.14; Plin. *Pan.* 26-8).¹⁰⁸ Likewise, Trajan and his successors would aid the provinces through their own food crises. When the flood of the Nile failed in 99 CE, Trajan relieved the famine of Egypt from the Egyptian grain reserves of Rome (*Pan.* 32). According to

¹⁰⁷ Erdkamp 2005: 253.

¹⁰⁸ Rickman 1980: 184.

their biographers, Hadrian, Antoninus Pious, and Marcus Aurelius continued Trajan's tradition of provincial aid (SHA *Hadr.* 21.5; *Ant. Pius* 8.11; *Marc.* 8.4-5). To sustain his aid programs, Trajan had to increase the capacity of the port of Ostia to receive and store grain. Trajan therefore constructed a new hexagonal inner harbor and storage complex within the Portus of Claudius.¹⁰⁹ Thanks to the harbor of Trajan, the largest grain ships from Alexandria and North Africa could by-pass Puteoli on their journey to Rome. After the competent management of "Five Good Emperors," the sixth emperor of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, Commodus, lost his reign to his inability to control either his own ego or the city's grain supply.¹¹⁰

I conclude that during the Principate (27 BCE-235 CE) Augustus and his successors subsumed the traditional authority of the Senate over the *annona* to ensure popular support. While Augustus restored this traditional authority to Senate in his Constitutional Settlement in 27 BCE and sustained it in the grain shortages of 23 BCE and 18 BCE, Augustus reversed his policy after the severe shortage of 6 CE. Between 10 and 14 CE, Augustus appointed the first permanent *praefectus annonae*, an imperial official, to manage the *annona* on the emperor's behalf. Despite his "republicanization" campaign, Tiberius did not dismiss the *praefectus annonae* and restore the Senate's administration of the *annona*. Without the intervention of the Senate, then, Caligula destabilized the *annona* with his reckless disregard. In his restoration of stability, Claudius subsumed the Senate's taxation and port authority for his officials. After Nero lost his reign because of his mismanagement of the *annona*, the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE) continued the *annona* without any radical changes. Despite Nerva's "republicanizing" reforms, the Antonine dynasty of emperors (98-192 CE) expanded the *annona* to secure their popular

¹⁰⁹ Rickman 1980: 75.

¹¹⁰ Garnsey 1988: 226.

support. Having documented how the emperors subsumed the traditional authority of the Senate,
I will reflect upon its political and social implications.

Conclusion: A Grain of Truth

Augustus and his successors subsumed the traditional authority of the Senate over *annona* to stabilize popular support for the Principate, developing a new infrastructure and imperial bureaucracy for its delivery. While the Senate and its *optimates* defended its traditional authority over the *annona* to maintain its control of political life throughout the Roman Republic (509-27 BCE), the Senate unwilling and unable to systemize the distribution and oversight of the *annona* lost control to the *consilium plebis* and its *populares*. Due to the weaknesses of ancient agriculture and logistics, short supplies of grain often threatened starvation in the ancient world. In this threat, political leaders found an opportunity to secure their popular support. Before the Punic Wars, the Roman Senate managed the *annona* with only *ad hoc* shipments of grain. While the economic dislocations and transformation of the Punic and Macedonian Wars compelled a more systematic approach to the *annona*, the Senate did not employ its authority out of its own self-interest. Instead, the *consilium plebis* and its reigning *populares* led the way to reform in their pursuit of plebeian support. While the Senate resisted the first wave of reform under the Gracchi brothers 133-123 BCE with assassination and appropriation, until the Senate repealed their laws entirely, the Senate yielded to the second wave of reform under Pompey and Clodius Pulcher 67-57 BCE, unable to administer the *annona*. To sustain these popular reforms, Pompey and Caesar in turn created systems to manage the *annona*.

Augustus and his successors in the Principate (27 BCE-235 CE) created a new imperial system to support the *annona*. While Augustus restored and sustained the traditional authority of the Senate over grain distribution until 6 BCE, Augustus appointed the first *praefectus annonae*, the first element of an imperial system. Despite his “republicanization” campaign, Tiberius expanded the imperial system of Augustus to the point that his successor Caligula and his

disregard destabilized the *annona*. In his restoration of stability, Claudius subsumed the Senate's taxation and port authority for his officials. After Nero lost his reign partly because of his mismanagement of the *annona*, the Flavian dynasty (69-96 CE) continued the *annona* without any radical changes. Despite Nerva's "republicanizing" reforms, the Antonine dynasty of emperors (98-192 CE) expanded the *annona* to secure their popular support. The Severan dynasty (193-235 CE) would continue the *annona* without any note in the literary record until the fall of Severus Alexander in 235 CE.

From my study of the *annona*, I propose a new perspective on the transition between the Republic and the Principate. Each of the big three imperial historians account for the Principate in terms of personal politics and preferences of the "great man" Augustus (*Div. Aug.* 28; *Rom. His.* 52.1; *Ann.* 1.2). By contrast, I argue that the Principate represents the long-term political result of growing social inequality in Rome. From an equalitarian society of yodel-men farmers and shepherds in the 2nd BCE, Rome had evolved into an unequal society by the 2nd CE, where the top 11.15% controlled an estimated 40% of the national income.¹¹¹ As income inequality arose, the competition between rich and poor, the *optimates* and *populares*, over the bounty of the Empire paralyzed the politics of the Roman Republic. In the deadlock of the late Republic, the Senate proved unwilling or unable to respond to the new needs of Rome and its extensive empire. Deadlock devolved into deadly civil war. To rebuild the Roman state from its ruin, Augustus and his successors created the Principate and its governance institutions on the basis of "Republican" precedent. Since Augustus could not equalize the distribution of wealth and power between the Emperor and his Senators, the Principate proved provisional.

By the same social inequality, the Principate transformed into the Dominate (195-476 CE). "Bad" emperors like Caligula and Nero exploited the inequality to impose their whims on

¹¹¹Scheidel and Friesen 2009: 62.

the political system over the Senate. “Good” emperors expanded imperial authority and bureaucracy to address the effects of the “bad” emperors. By the Dominate, the emperors could rule with their imperial bureaucracy without the assistance of Senate. While the decline of Rome’s importance and population made the *annona* less of a concern than before for the emperors, emperors reorganized the *annona* in the 4th century CE to impose state control on the *negotiatores*, the last private agent in the *annona*.¹¹² By the 5th century, the *annona* ceased unable to import grain from Vandal-occupied North Africa.

But what can the contemporary world learn from the *annona*? Its improvements in communication and transportation render the logistical lessons of the *annona* obsolete. Modern corporations do with little to no inventory, the primary tool of the long-lived first *praefectus annonae* Gaius Terrentius.¹¹³ Despite its obsolete logistics, the *annona* can reveal to the world the importance of a contemporary problem: income inequality. As I write, the top quintile of the United States earns around 50% of the national income, comparable to the top quintile of the Roman world in the second century CE.¹¹⁴ While the Romans could not address inequality unaware of it and its impacts, the United States still can before inequality transforms its political system. Even if the forces of globalization and the “winner-take-most” knowledge economy make higher income inequality difficult to deflect, the United States can still change its policy to promote opportunity for the middle class with better education and healthcare.¹¹⁵ May the history of the *annona* prove profitable.

¹¹² Rickman 1980: 200.

¹¹³ Cox 2011: 1.

¹¹⁴ DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2014: 30.

¹¹⁵ Dabla-Norris, Kochhar, Ricka, Suphaphiphat, and Tsounta 2015: 3.

Appendix I: Grain Provinces



Bible History Online. "Roman Empire at its Greatest Extent."

In the late Roman Republic (ca 150-27 BCE), Africa and Sicily supplied the *annona*. In the Roman Principate (27 BCE-235 CE), Egypt emerged as a source for the *annona*.

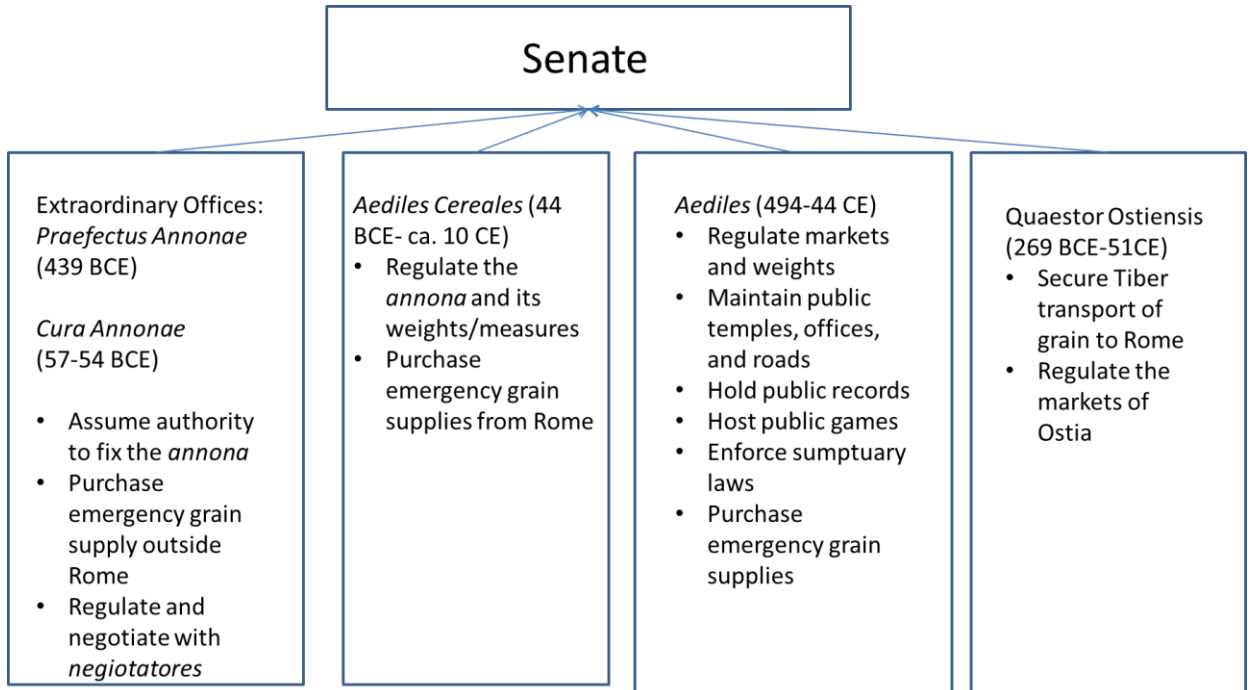
Appendix II: Roman Trade Routes



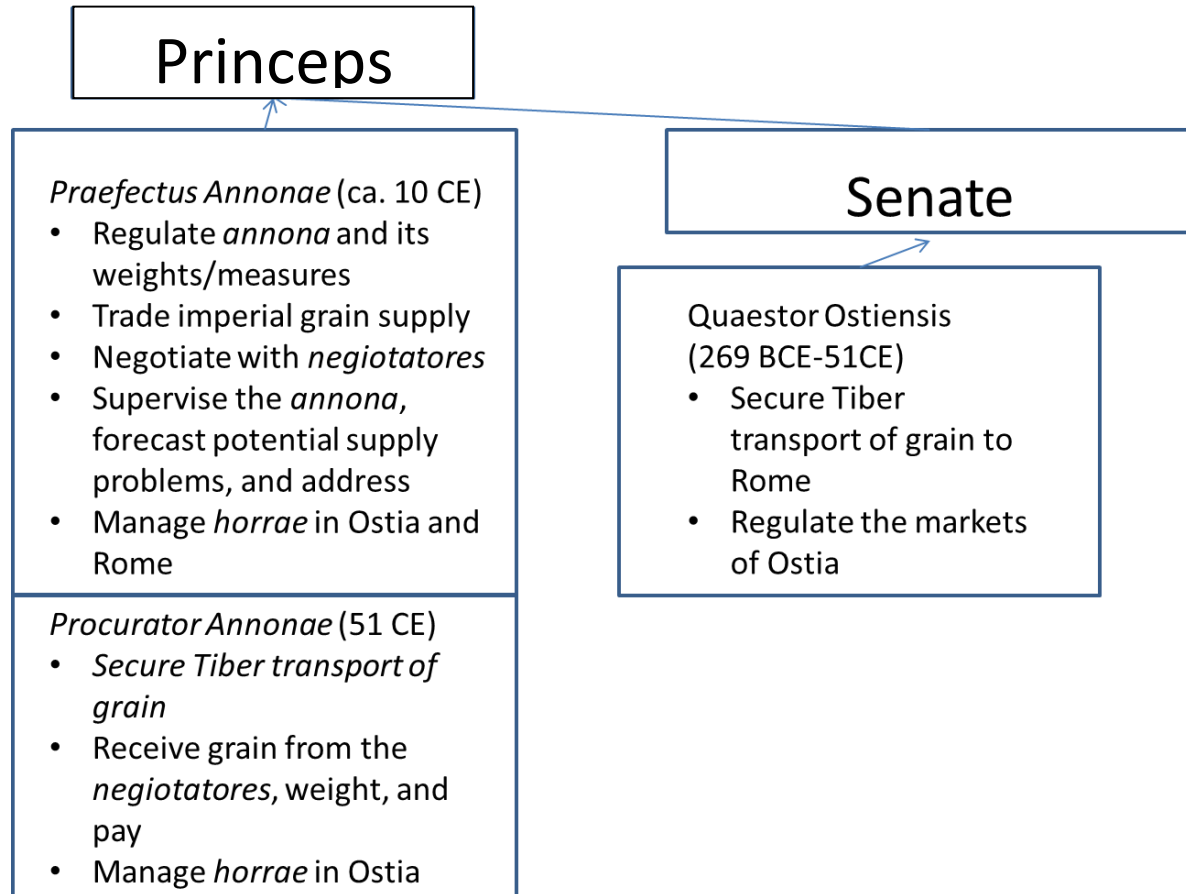
Adhavoc. 2010. "Principal Roman Trade Routes, Internal and External in 180 AD"

Appendix III: Annona Organizational Charts

Republic (509-27 BCE)

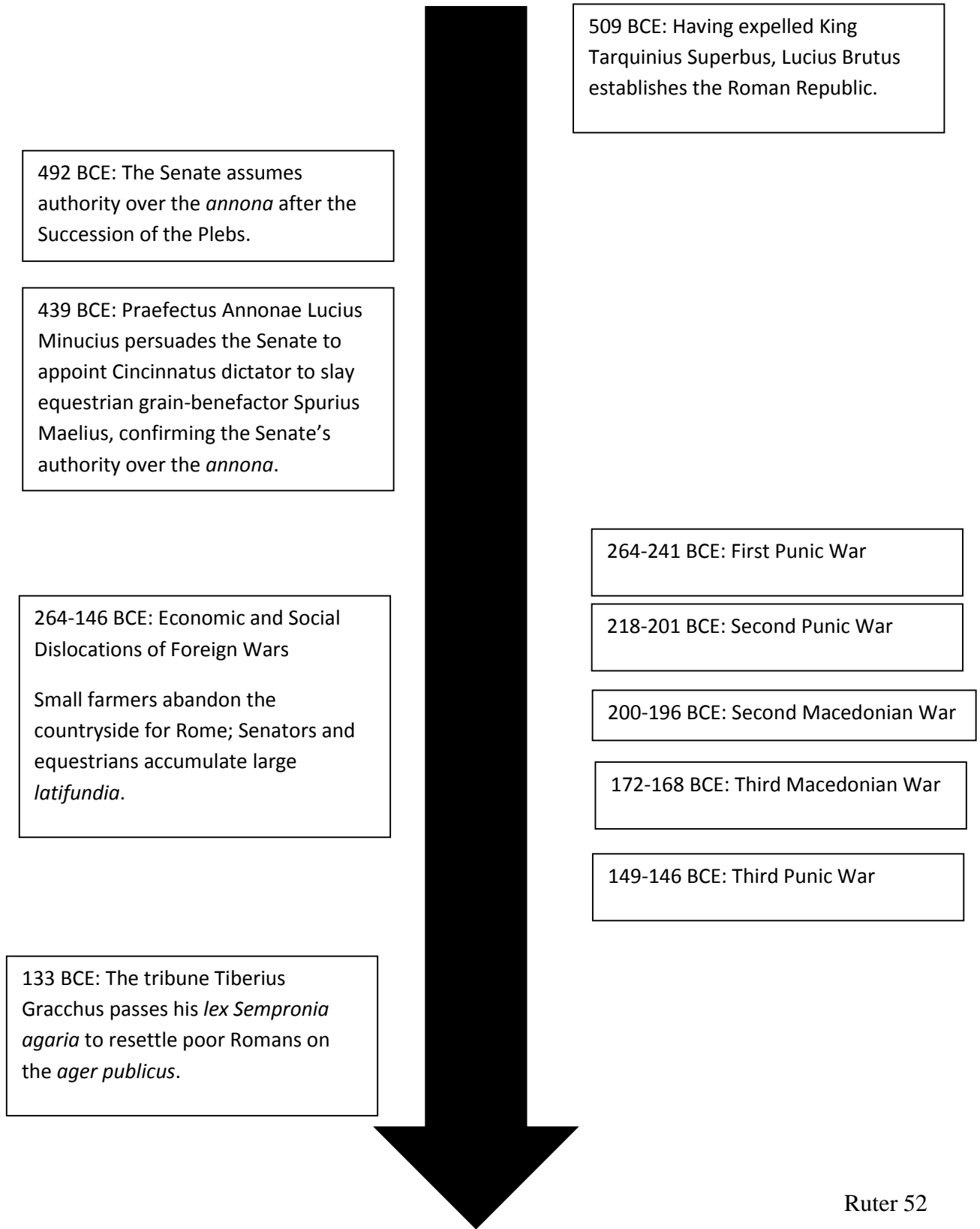


Principate (11 CE-193 CE)



Appendix IV: Summary Timeline of the *Annona*

Annona in the Early to Middle of the Roman Republic (509-133 BCE)



Annona: Gracchian Period (133 BCE-100CE)

135-132 BCE: First Servile War

133 BCE: Tiberius Gracchus passes *rogatio Sempronia de pecunia regis Attali* to fund his land commission. Fearful of his new power, the Senate assassinates Tiberius.

129 BCE: The land commission of Tiberius ceases after the successful resettlement of 15,000 Romans.

123 BCE: Tribune Gaius Gracchus passes the *lex frumentaria* to grant citizens the right to purchase subsidized grain every month.

122 BCE: Gaius Gracchus pushes forward the *lex agraria* and *lex Rubrica* to resettle Romans abroad.

121 BCE: Gaius Gracchus kills himself.

119-100BCE (?): Tribune Marcus Octavius replaces the *lex frumentaria* with his *lex Octavia* to reduce costs.

112-106 BCE: Jugurthine War

100 BCE: Tribune Saturnius proposes to replace the *lex Octavia* with a new law, decreasing the price of 3 pound ration to five-sixth of an ass. After the Senate purchases grain to win support, the Senate arrests Saturnius.

104-100 BCE: Second Servile War

Annona: Late Republic (100-27 BCE)

81 BCE: The Senate repeals the *lex Oxtavia*, suspending discount grain distributions.

74 BCE: The Senate appoints praetor Marcus Antonius with unlimited authority to chase down the pirates of Crete.

73 BCE: Consuls Marcus Terentius Varro Lucullus and Gaius Cassius Longinus passed the *lex Terentia et Cassia frumentaria*, restoring grain distributions.

67 BCE: Tribune Aulus Gabinius passed the *lex Gabinia* over the opposition of the Senate to give leadership over the anti-piratical campaign to Pompey.

62 BCE: Cato the Younger expands eligibility for grain distributions to forestall a loss of Senatorial authority.

58 BCE: the tribune Publius Clodius Pulcher passed his *lex Clodia frumentaria* to subsume the entire Senatorial authority over the *annona*.

57 BCE: Under the *Lex Cornelia Caecilia*, Pompey assumes the *cura annonae*.

43 BCE: The Senate prohibits the creation of a *cura annonae*.

83-81 BCE: Second Mithradatic
Sulla's Dictatorship and Consulship

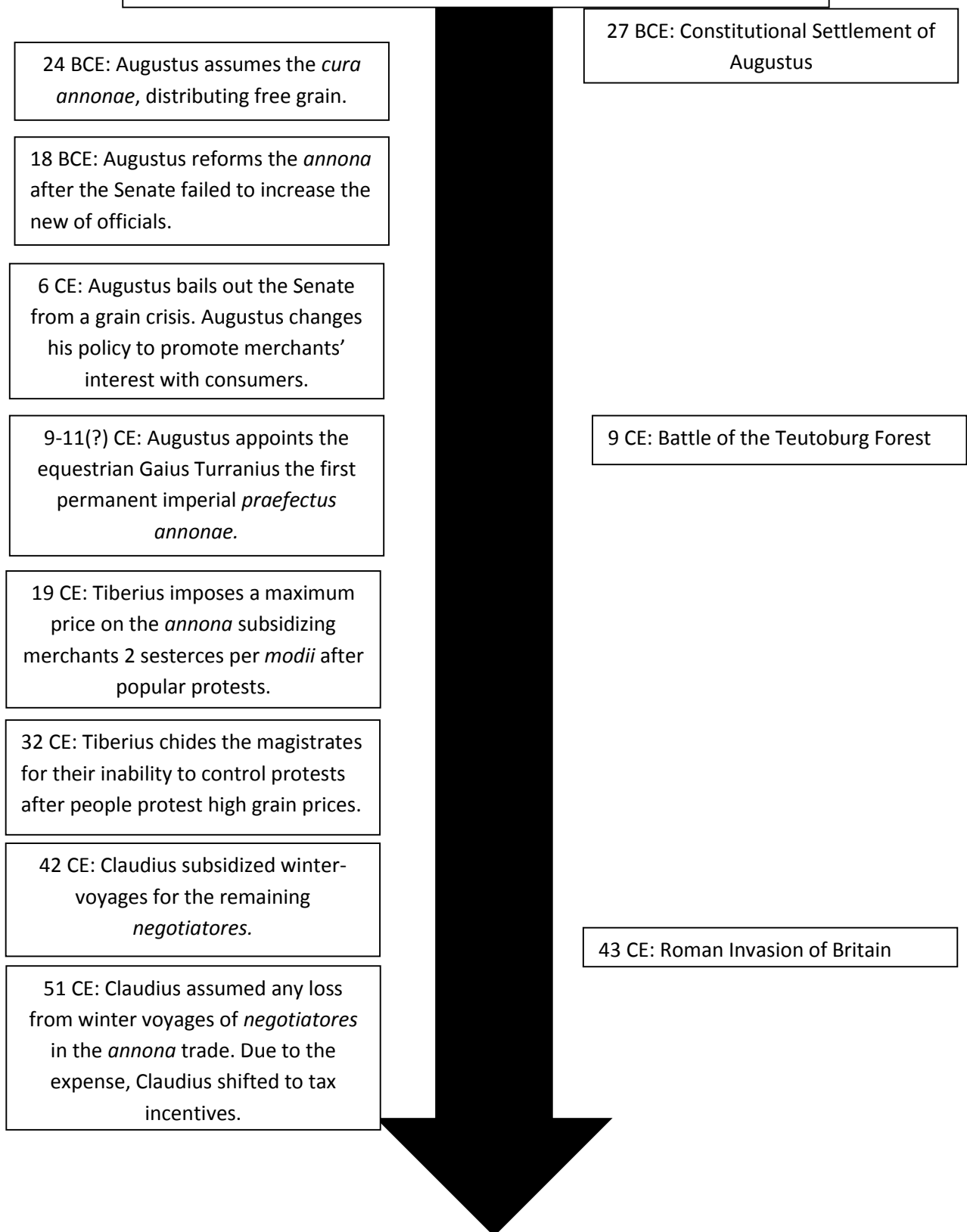
75-63 BCE: Third Mithradatic War

73-71 BCE: Third Servile War

49-45 BCE: Caesar's Civil War

31 BCE: Battle of Actium

Annona in the Early Julio-Claudian Dynasty of the Principate: 27 BCE-51 CE



Annona in the Late Julio-Claudian and Flavian Dynasty of the Principate (51-89 CE)

58 CE: Nero allows *negotiatores* to exclude their merchant ships from their taxable property.

62 CE: Nero according to Tacitus tosses moldy public grain reserves into the Tiber to quell Parthian war anxiety.

64 CE: Nero suspends free public grain distributions, setting a maximum price of 3 sesterces per *modius*, three pounds.

64 CE: Nero attempts a canal project to ease transport.

65 CE: Nero grants the Praetorian Guard free public grain distributions and two thousand sesterces.

68 CE: Nero loses popular support for his monopolization of grain supplies.

89 CE: Domitian declares an edict to prohibit the creation of new vineyards in Italy and to uproot half of the provincial vineyards but never enforces.

64 CE: Great Fire of Rome

65 CE: Pisonian Conspiracy

68 CE: Senator Vindex's Gallic Rebellion

69 CE: Year of Four Emperors

79 CE: Eruption of Mount Vesuvius

Annona in the Nerva-Antonine Dynasty of the Principate (98-192 CE)

96-98 CE: Nerva restores the Senate's power and property after the seizures of Domitian. He resettles poor Romans across Italy on 60 million sesterces of land.

99 CE: Trajan relieves the famine of Egypt from Rome's reserves.

99 CE: Trajan grants grain to 5,000 boys in the cities of Italy.

113 CE: Trajan constructs a new harbor for Ostia to support his aid.

98 CE: Mutiny of Casperius Aelianus and his Praetorian Guardsmen

101-106: Dacian Wars

192 CE: Commodus the last Nerva-Antonine emperor falls unable to manage the *annona*.

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