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THE GRACCHI AND THE ERA OF GRAIN REFORM IN ANCIENT ROME

By Samuel B. Aly

Rome's growing population in the late Republic was a positive sign. However, the metropolis was becoming larger than any before, indeed much larger. Exponential expansion and the booming capital city itself both forced society to adapt to an increasingly condensed metropolis. The days of food provisions from the city's hinterland were over; Republican officials struggled to find ways to bolster the traditional method of supply. Fortunately, the developing trade network across the Mediterranean incrementally provided a solution to the problem. Republican officials had to find a way to facilitate the introduction of large-scale shipping in a way that allowed an effective, organized distribution of the grain that was so essential to the diet of ancient commoners. Towards the end of the second-century BC, the dichotomy between landowners and lesser members of society quickly approached a breaking point. Beginning in 123 BC, a century-long era of wide-ranging farming and grain reform began under the Gracchus brothers, Tiberius and Gaius, which determined the course of Roman grain distribution for centuries.

Why was grain so imperative for Rome? In short, grains were the cheapest, most efficient foodstuffs that subsisted in the majority of the ancient Mediterranean. They were most often measured by the *modius*, an amount equal to about 2.4 gallons of modern U.S. measurement.¹ Wheat and barley were the primary two forms of cereals in the region as they were most appropriate and most bountiful in its distinct soil.² Barley was easier to produce in substandard soil and provided less nutrition, so it was primarily a product for the poor in the Roman grain market.³ One problem that the population had to deal with once it received the grain was processing the un-milled, raw material. Many who were unable to afford milling grain into flour or baking it into bread simply ate it as porridge or flat cakes.⁴

¹ Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314.

² Geoffrey Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 5.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Peter Garnsey, "Mass Diet and Nutrition in the City of Rome," in *Cities, Peasants, and Food in Classical Antiquity: Essays in Social and Economic History*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 237.

To emphasize the importance of the cereals that were shipped to Rome every year, Tacitus wrote that the lower classes of the city “[had] no public interests save the grain supply.”⁵ Ammianus Marcellus recounts a story from the city under threat of a possible shortage in 359 AD, several centuries after the implementation of the grain distribution. An angry mob was openly threatening Tertullus, a prefect in charge of the *annona*, though it might have been unfair to hold the man in charge accountable for the stormy weather that was keeping the grain ships away.⁶ To appease the boiling crowd, he presented his young sons for all to see and declared that even they would suffer the same fate as the rest of the citizenry. Luckily for Tertullus, his sons, and the rest of Rome, the ships finally did arrive and provide the city with the food it needed. The supply was no small matter for the people or the leaders of Rome.

The food supply remains one of the best ways to estimate of Rome’s population, given that average human food consumption is a relatively constant value throughout history.⁷ Food consumption in terms of Roman *modii* of grain is recorded in a variety of sources, from Cato to Sallust to Seneca. Barley and wheat contained the best price-to-calorie ratio in the diet of the ancient world and therefore were absolutely essential for the lower classes of burgeoning late-Republican Rome.⁸ Whitney Oates asserts that by compiling and examining the statistics from these ancient writings, it is safe to assume a monthly average of four *modii* of grain provided for each person living in Rome.⁹ This includes every man, woman, or child, although the five *modii* distributions in the late Republic were only for adult men. However, it is important to remember that all five *modii* may not have been available to its recipient due to deterioration over time or splitting the grain among multiple members of a household.¹⁰ Oates’ estimate for the population of metropolitan Rome under Augustus came to 1,125,000, although the more common estimate is under one million.¹¹

The population question arises when considering the necessity of cheap grain for the people of Rome. Common laborers and slaves represented a significant portion of the population of Rome, although it is difficult to

⁵ Tacitus, *Histories*, trans. C.H. Moore. Loeb Classical Library (1931), 4.38.

⁶ Ammianus Marcellus, *Res Gestae*, trans. J.C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, vol. I (1935), 19.10.1-4.

⁷ Whitney J. Oates, “The Population of Rome,” *Classical Philology* 29, no. 2 (April 1934): 103-4.

⁸ Geoffrey Rickman, “The Grain Trade Under the Roman Empire,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 36 (1980): 262.

⁹ Oates, 106.

¹⁰ Garnsey, 236.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

determine the exact number because the majority of records only include the citizenry of the city. These workers had an extremely unstable income, often the result of seasonal employment, which led to minimal buying power.¹²

Not only was Rome the largest known city to exist up to that point, its food supply system was different from other grand capitals of the ancient world. Alexandria, Antioch, and Carthage relied on the hinterland for their grain, with only a very small percentage of their supply being shipped from elsewhere in the Mediterranean.¹³ In contrast, Rome relied extremely heavily on shipments from several agricultural powerhouses around the sea. As the 200s BC drew to a close, there were two questions: how could the city itself attain enough grain to feed its people? And, even if the grain could be found, how could it be made accessible to all of the classes of society?

The empire that was soon to bud under Augustus provided fertile lands with which to sustain Rome. The Mediterranean provided a perfect location for a burgeoning political empire (see Figure 3). The sea, ‘Mare Nostrum,’ allowed for easy transport and shipping due to its relatively short width and temperate climate. The empire’s capital could not have been placed in a more favorable region. Rome enjoyed access to almost any region in the known world, from the Levant to Iberia to Libya. In addition, the port of Ostia, at the base of the Tiber River, supplied a perfect place for ships to dock and send their product in barges to the capital. This geographical advantage for agricultural trade had been seen before with the colossal role that Rhodes (between Crimea and Egypt, two of the largest suppliers) had played in supplying Alexander’s Greece with grain.¹⁴

Cicero referred to Sicily, Africa, and Sardinia as “the three great granaries of the republic.”¹⁵ Indeed, as evidence of his political accomplishment in Sicily, he mentions his prowess in providing large shipments of grain for Rome during a food shortage.¹⁶ Sicily was the first of these provinces to adjoin to Rome. Next came Sardinia, which had taxes of grain rather than money, and finally Egypt and Africa.¹⁷

¹² Paul Erdkamp, *The Grain Market in the Roman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 259.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁴ Lionel Casson, “The Grain Trade of the Hellenistic World,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 85 (1954): 172.

¹⁵ Cicero, *On Pompey’s Command (De Imperio)*, trans. Ingo Gildenhard and Louise Hodgson et. al. Classics Library, 34.

¹⁶ Cicero, *How to Run a Country: An Ancient Guide for Modern Leaders*, trans. Phillip Freeman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 14.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 9.

Although there is much debate about the validity of grain import statistics during the Principate, sources from within the Empire agree that Egypt was a vital part of Rome's supply line. Aurelius Victor wrote in the fourth century AD that twenty million allotments of grain were shipped annually from Egypt specifically for the city of Rome during the reign of Augustus.¹⁸ This number is generally assumed to be incorrect due to ancient estimation methods and Aurelius' lack of chronologically proximity, but it is surely intended as fact based on the huge fleets of grain ships that flooded into the port of Ostia during a year. However, Egypt eventually became less important due to the development of the North African agricultural industry, even under the Principate.¹⁹

It has been thoroughly established that Egypt, Africa, Sardinia, and Sicily had enough grain to provide for the booming Italian metropolis, but who was going to organize that supply's administration? This question is answered extensively by ancient sources. The open market could not be relied on for an annual project of such epic proportions; there were few men who had the resources and fewer who would use their power to support the plebians of Rome. This left the task in the hands of political authorities whose role in society was dependent on keeping the populace well-fed and secure.²⁰

A significant amount of Roman political efforts from the late Republic to the Principate focused on land and grain distribution. The origins of Roman agricultural reform and the grain ration that became a characteristic of Roman life are found in the second century BC with a pair of great politicians and brothers, the Gracchi. Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus activated a sweeping, effective trend of reform that brought grain to the people of Rome in an increasingly accessible manner.

Plutarch provides much of what is known about the Gracchi as people. As the older brother, Tiberius was "gentle and composed," while Gaius was "highly strung and impassioned."²¹ In an article on the motivations of the Gracchan reformers, Solomon Katz offers a look into the effects their divergent personalities had on their political actions. Ancient sources provide an image of the elder Gracchi as an idealistic and practical politician when it came to his

¹⁸ Aurelius Victor, *Epitome De Caesaribus*, trans. Thomas M. Banchich (Buffalo, New York: Canisius College, 2009), 1.6.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 234.

²⁰ W. L. Westermann. "Aelius Gallus and the Reorganization of the Irrigation System of Egypt under Augustus," *Classical Philology* 12, no. 3 (July 1917): 237.

²¹ Plutarch, *Makers of Rome: Nine Lives*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 154.

reforms of Roman agriculture. However, Gaius, zealous and outspoken, seemed to be more of a true social reformer, valuing above all an “unequivocal fashion the sovereignty of the people.”²² Plutarch evokes an image of Gaius as a fervent orator on the people’s side. He states that “Gaius was the first Roman to stride up and down the rostra and wrench his toga off his shoulder,” a sign of extreme emotion and distress, and that his speeches “tended to electrify his audience and [were] impassioned to the point of exaggeration.”²³ By contrast, level-headed Tiberius once negotiated an agreement with the Numantines that saved the Roman army from a potentially devastating massacre of 20,000 full citizens, plus slaves and other companions.²⁴

These men were powerful orators and politicians that used their talents with the populace for reform. Tiberius’ main agrarian law dealt with equitable land distribution after the capture of enemy territory. Usually, some land was auctioned off and the rest was considered public land in which the poor could reside and work for a small rent. A law was introduced to prevent the rich from controlling all of said land, but it was circumvented through false names of fictional peasants.²⁵ Tiberius introduced legislation that sought to allot this land to the poor, including men who had fought for the Roman army but were returning from service with nowhere to live because of monopolistic landowners. His unique blend of practicality and idealism were apparent in this case. Tiberius intended to “rebuild the army by a system of small land grants which would at the same time curb the growing slave menace.”²⁶ While Tiberius Gracchus was certainly thinking of the well-being of the poor of Roman society, he primarily focused on returning the agricultural state of the republic to a highly functioning industry that aligned the goals of the government and the common people.

Tiberius Gracchus’ reforms went against the desires of the aristocratic and wealthy members of the Senate, many the very landowners that Tiberius sought to control. During the process of sanctioning the bill, he bypassed the Senate in favor of the popular assembly, a legal but extremely unorthodox choice. Not to be outwitted, the aristocratic Senators convinced an assembly member named Octavius to veto the law. Tiberius then made the ill-conceived and highly controversial decision to have the senator deposed by forcibly

²² Solomon Katz, “The Gracchi: An Essay in Interpretation,” *The Classical Journal* 38, no. 2 (November 1942): 74.

²³ Plutarch, *Makers of Rome*, 155.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 157-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁶ Katz, 71.

removing him from the chamber and pushed the proposal into law. This action was Tiberius' downfall. His conduct "had offended not only the aristocratic party but even the people."²⁷ On the day he was to be up for reelection, his supporters heard of a plot to kill Tiberius and a riot broke out in the streets of Rome. The aristocrats of the Senate themselves emerged from their chambers and murdered Tiberius Gracchus.²⁸

This event was a turning point in the eyes of many second-century Romans. David Stockton compares Rome's atmosphere to the "doubtful truce" that Thucydides spoke of describing the Peace of Nicias during the Peloponnesian War.²⁹ The citizenry witnessed unrestrained lawlessness, not in a backwards province but the great city of Rome itself, because of political disagreements among the aristocrats. An incontestable mixture of regret and fear seemed to loom over the city until other legislation provided an appropriate diversion from the events of 123 BC.

One reason for including Tiberius Gracchus in the discussion of Roman grain laws is the effect his policies and death had on his younger brother. However, the agrarian laws he passed and the implications that can be taken from his reform are more important. The Roman agricultural system needed reorganization, mostly because of the burgeoning number of rural unemployed commoners. Under authority of the previous laws, the elite landowners grew more powerful while the poor were pushed out completely. Tiberius' agrarian laws helped provide a more stable base for the Rome-adjacent poor and improve the efficiency and output of the Roman agricultural hinterland.

After Tiberius' death, Gaius retreated from politics and public life for a spell. Plutarch speculates that he could have been either afraid of his brother's murderers or playing the victim to make them seem even more vile.³⁰ In either case, he "had been quiet for some time after his brother's death, but since many of the senators treated him scornfully he announced himself as a candidate for the office of tribune."³¹

Gaius' return to the political stage was anything but timid. After winning the position of tribune, his agenda consisted of one item: reform. From the beginning of the reemergence of Gaius Gracchus, everyone in Rome knew he was against the Senate and aristocracy. He introduced law after law and

²⁷ Plutarch, *Makers of Rome*, 167.

²⁸ Plutarch, *Makers of Rome*, 172.

²⁹ David Stockton, *The Gracchi* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979), 87.

³⁰ Plutarch, *Makers of Rome*, 175.

³¹ Appian, *Histories*, trans. Horace White (Loeb Classical Library, 1913), 1.21.

earned for himself “the wholehearted devotion of the people.”³² Unfortunately, his legislation also drove him farther and farther away from his fellow tribunes. After the accidental death of one of his enemies’ attendants at the hands of his supporters, his opponents became even more numerous and determined to put a stop to his rabble-rousing antics. After a regrettable series of events, the city was thrown into uproar and Gaius was chased around the city until he finally committed suicide in a sacred grove.³³ Gaius’ desecrated body was thrown into the Tiber and washed away, but his legacy and the laws he managed to pass, had an effect that spanned centuries.

The most important of Gaius’ laws amending the administration of grain in Rome, the reason why the Gracchi should be considered the stimulant of this reform, is the *lex frumentaria* (for specificity, the *lex Sempronia frumentaria*), which Gaius passed in 123 BC. The law provided a monthly distribution of grain to Roman citizens at a set cost (six and 1/3 *asses* per *modius*), which was extremely beneficial for the Roman plebs who would be considered middle class by today’s standards. He paid for this by reorganizing the taxation system of Asian provinces so as to be more efficient for the capital’s revenue.³⁴ The law’s main benefit, maybe one of the main motivations behind it, was the protection it provided from price fluctuations in the open market.³⁵ The law’s organization may initially seem similar to a welfare system, but the *lex frumentaria* was not inherently aimed at aiding the poor or needy. However, for the Romans, this distribution system was groundbreaking and opened a new political debate that would rage on in the Roman legislature.

Patrons gifting grain to their clients, politicians to their supporters, was not unusual. In fact, Gaius Gracchus’ *lex frumentaria* could be considered a way to regulate and aid this philanthropy. Generosity of the well-to-do was not without strings attached; it was often used to buy votes from the middle classes. Alternatively, the law of Gaius Gracchus irked rich politicians who were looking to buy votes because fewer and fewer plebeians were reliant on their aid due to lower grain prices, and were therefore less likely to accept it.

Gaius started a practice that many politicians utilized later in the century—winning over support by employing political power to give food benefits to the electorate.³⁶ Grain distribution policies became quite common in

³² Plutarch, *Makers of Rome*, 184.

³³ Plutarch, *Makers of Rome*, 191.

³⁴ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 172.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 160.

³⁶ Erdkamp, 241.

the centuries following the *lex frumentaria*. Robert Rowland asserts that the law did very little to help the impoverished of the city, but rather only helped the plebs who already had some access to grain on the open market.³⁷ Despite the overall discrimination against the lower classes, it can be argued that benefits may have trickled down from the middle class to the poor through the utilization of the *annona* as a market manipulation.³⁸ Essentially, though grain was not distributed to all, all benefited from the influx of cheap grain that drove down market prices.

The period between the Gracchi and Augustus represents an important development of the Roman grain distribution system. In his book *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, published in 1980, Geoffrey Rickman outlines three sections that demarcate the progression of Roman legislation on grain.³⁹ Through this categorization, the first two sections lie within the century of reform started by Gracchan reform. The first begins with Gaius Gracchus' grain law in 123 BC and ends with Clodius in 58 BC. The second section starts with Pompey's institution of the *cura annonae* in 57 BC and continues through the beginning of the Principate. The final section covers the time after Augustus, which was not influenced by the Gracchi.

As stated before, there were many adjustments to the system of grain distribution in the century after the *lex frumentaria*. Rowland recounts a summary of distribution reformers, or attempted reformers, over the sixty years: Octavius, Saturnius, Drusus, Lepidus, Cato the Younger, and Clodius.⁴⁰ Gracchan reform catalyzed this scattered, almost frenetic reformation of laws dealing with the metropolitan grain supply.⁴¹

The first in this list is a magistrate named only as M. Octavius, who introduced the *lex Octavia frumentaria*. The law replaced and nullified Gaius Gracchus' earlier grain distribution law. It was intended to lower the deficit the treasury had been running since the establishment of the Gracchan law without stirring up the plebs who were beneficiaries.⁴² There are many ways this could have been achieved: lowering the price of a distribution, lowering the amount of grain in a distribution, or reducing the number of recipients. J. G. Schovánek

³⁷ Robert Rowland, "The 'Very Poor' and the Grain Dole at Rome and Oxyrhynchus," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 21 (1976): 69.

³⁸ Erdkamp, 243.

³⁹ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 157.

⁴⁰ Rowland, 70-2.

⁴¹ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 157.

⁴² J. G. Schovánek, "The Provisions of the 'Lex Octavia Frumentaria,'" *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 26, no. 3 (1977): 378.

examines the possible effects of Octavius' law in his paper "The Provisions of the 'Lex Octavia Frumentaria.'" After assessing the scant evidence gathered from first-century sources, he asserts that the law "first introduced the stipulations legally restricting the distributions to the poorest classes of citizens as well as those limiting the monthly individual ration to five modii."⁴³ Dating the law is complex, although common estimates range between 121 and 119 BC, as an almost retaliatory measure to Gaius' death, or perhaps in the 90s BC.⁴⁴

After the *lex Octavia* began a series of distribution laws which were systematically passed and repealed by successive politicians. Sulla's consulship was responsible for the repeal of the *lex Octavia frumentaria*, but Lepidus soon proposed a replacement.⁴⁵ In a rousing speech recorded in Sallust's *Histories*, he declared, "The Roman people, lately ruler of the nations, now stripped of power, repute and rights, without the means to live and an object of contempt, does not even retain the rations of slaves."⁴⁶ Because there is little primary evidence from this period, it remains undetermined whether he actually passed a law or not. The fact is somewhat inconsequential because in 78 BC another distribution law was passed, meaning that either Lepidus' law was successful initially but quickly repealed, or his bill was never made into law in the first place.⁴⁷

Cato the Younger's grain law in 62 BC holds special importance in the era of reform. Pirates had been a growing issue for the Republic over the early-to-mid first century, stopping supply lines and ransacking Sicilian grain ships on which Rome so desperately relied. Cato successfully avoided an uprising of Roman denizens, frightened at the prospect of going without enough food for the winter, by extending the distributions of grain to the "poor and landless multitudes."⁴⁸ This follows the pattern that was earlier established by Gaius Gracchus; that political success, or in this case domestic peace, could be achieved by providing easier access to the food supply for the poor and previously unentitled.

To cap Rickman's first category of grain distribution laws, one must look to Clodius' tribuneship in 58 BC. Clodius was the first to turn the price

⁴³ Schovánek, 381.

⁴⁴ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 161-2.

⁴⁵ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 166.

⁴⁶ Sallust, "Speech of the Consul Lepidus to the Roman People," in *Histories*, trans. John C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library, 1931), 11.

⁴⁷ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 166.

⁴⁸ Plutarch, "Life of Cato the Younger," in *The Parallel Lives*, vol. 8, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb Classical Library, 1923), 26.1.

controlled grain into a free dole for its recipients. Since the time of Gaius Gracchus, the price per unit had oscillated to the benefit of either the plebs or the Republic's revenue. It was finally settled. Grain recipients no longer paid for their food, Clodius arranged it to be paid for by the newly-annexed Cyprus and sale of royal lands there.⁴⁹ This aspect of the legislation provides a parallel to Gaius' reorganization of Asia. The model set by the Gracchan reformer was still effective nearly seven decades later.

Clodius' *lex* clearly had great effect on the people of the day, but it also had deeper implications than just what was stated in the law. The free distribution of grain was now a right of the Roman citizen, something that would be almost impossible to repeal without significant discontent or even revolt. This example of government interference went further than just affecting distributions; it assumed control over farms, land, and stores of grain that contributed to the Roman supply.⁵⁰ Rickman writes that both Cato's and Clodius' laws may or may not be partially responsible for inflated first-century prices, but the much more important factor was the piracy epidemic that afflicted the Mediterranean.⁵¹ The sea was no longer safe. Something had to be done.

Grain ships were having trouble reaching Rome from Sicily and Sardinia, let alone those venturing from as far away as Egypt or Africa. Merchants were less likely to send shipments, for good reason. After several failed attempts at controlling the growing menace that spanned decades, Pompey was given complete control of a fleet of up to five hundred ships in 67 BC for a maximum of three years.⁵² At long last, Rome had found a successful measure. Ancient sources did not report large scale piracy for centuries afterwards. Pompey's swift and severe suppression of the problem quieted grain price fluctuations in the city and reopened the Mediterranean trade network that had been slowly dwindling.

After his remarkable success on the sea, Pompey was given complete control of the grain supply of the Roman world in 57 BC. He took on this task with his usual vigor. That same year, Pompey personally orchestrated the purchase of cheap grain around the Mediterranean.⁵³ Once, after pushing his storm-threatened grain fleet to continue sailing, "he filled the sea with ships and

⁴⁹ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 172.

⁵⁰ Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 52.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome*, 51.

⁵³ Peter Temin, "Wheat Prices and Trade in the Early Roman Empire," in *The Roman Market Economy*, Princeton University Press (2013): 33.

the markets with grain, so that the excess of what he had provided sufficed also for foreign peoples, and there was an abundant overflow, as from a spring, for all.”⁵⁴ It seems clear that Pompey’s approach to this five-year appointment was circumstantial; he interfered when necessary.⁵⁵ With this singular, case-by-case approach to grain shortages, Pompey almost single-handedly stabilized the Roman grain network throughout the Mediterranean in the mid-50s BC.

Julius Caesar’s role in the grain distribution was also significant. Fewer policies and rules changed during his reign relative to the somewhat obsessive grain legislation reform of the early first century BC. However, he did create *aediles cereals*, officials that dealt with Roman grain supply issues, including distributions, the market, and trade.⁵⁶ Many of Caesar’s prospective policies focused on consolidation and reorganization of the number, record-keeping, and method of receipt, of the beneficiaries of the grain dole. However, his assassination did cut many plans short and the unfulfilled policies were left in the hands of Augustus.

In the time of Augustus the *annona* provided free monthly grain in distributions of five *modii* each for only 150,000 people.⁵⁷ Augustus provided grain to the people during many shortages throughout his rule. In his *Deeds of the Divine Augustus (Res Gestae)*, Augustus states several instances of these measures. The number of recipients reached as high 320,000 in 5 BC as a temporary measure to alleviate a food shortage.⁵⁸ Augustus provided grain to smaller amounts of people several times during his reign, even as often as three times within two years (24-23 BC).

According to Cassius Dio, Augustus followed in Caesar’s footsteps by assigning magistrates to the charge of grain, although his officers were especially focused on distribution. When Rome fell into disease and famine, the people came to Augustus petitioning him both to become dictator and to take control of the grain supply, the latter of which he accepted.⁵⁹ “. . . Augustus further provided that, for the distribution of grain, one candidate, who must have served as praetor three years previously, should be nominated each year by each

⁵⁴ Plutarch, “Life of Pompey,” in *The Parallel Lives*, vol. 5, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb Classical Library, 1923), 50.2.

⁵⁵ Temin, 33.

⁵⁶ Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 6 (1917), 43.51.3

⁵⁷ Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 16.

⁵⁸ Augustus, *Deeds of the Divine Augustus*, trans. Thomas Bushnell (1998), 15.

⁵⁹ Cassius Dio, 54.1.3.

of the officials then serving, and that, from these nominees, four men should be chosen by lot to serve in succession as distributors of grain.”⁶⁰

Augustus also implemented a more efficient system of distribution by providing tickets of entitlement, *tesserae frumentariae*, which Suetonius records in his *Life of Augustus*. “He revised the lists of the people district by district, and to prevent the commons from being called away from their occupations too often because of the distributions of grain, he determined to give out tickets for four months' supply three times a year; but at their urgent request he allowed a return to the old custom of receiving a share every month.”⁶¹ This kind of foresight is exactly what made Augustus deserving of the authority he received. These *tesserae* improved efficiency for both the state and the recipients, while also allowing for easier recognition of those who were entitled to the dole.

The distribution and administration of grain did not end with Augustus. As the empire developed there emerges a rich history of the food supply in the provinces as well as the city of Rome. As early as AD 100, *frumentarii* were provincial Roman officials subordinate to the governor who occupied a wide variety of roles, but their function was the supply of grain for a city or military force.⁶² It is important to remember that Augustus began organizing the grain network for the military in addition to all of the domestic policies he implemented.

Augustus' administration of the food supply represents the end of a significant trend in Roman history. The city of Rome had developed over centuries into the largest metropolis the known world had ever seen, generating an urgent need for reorganization of the food supply. The Mediterranean provided rich agricultural production, most significantly in Sicily, Sardinia, Africa, and Egypt, which allowed Rome to survive. Ample grain supplies led many politicians to find ways to provide the staple to the citizens of Rome in an accessible and affordable manner. Pioneering this reform were the Gracchi, Tiberius and Gaius, who first introduced widespread grain reform of an aging, unequal system. Laws were altered, amended, and replaced several times over the course of a century. The grain distribution established a new form of social and political interaction between politicians and the common people. Despite all of the complications and disputes over the issue, by the early Principate period a

⁶⁰ Cassius Dio, 54.17.1.

⁶¹ Suetonius, “Life of Augustus,” in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library, 1913), 40.2.

⁶² William G. Sinnigen, “The Origins of the ‘Frumentarii,’” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 27 (1962): 14-15.

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solid agricultural and political foundation had been established for the supply and administration of grain in Rome.