



The Cursus Honorum and Pliny's Political Career

The **cursus honorum**

The **cursus honorum** was the sequence of offices which men could hold within the hierarchy of Rome.

Under the Republic the sequence and age restrictions were for the most part closely adhered to. During the late Republic (in particular during the 1st century BCE) many of the traditional structures of government broke down – some skipped steps in the sequence and attained offices at younger and younger ages and, in general, the influence and power of individuals began to usurp Republican systems.

Under the Empire the hierarchy remained as a means for men to hold political office – largely at the discretion of the Emperor. Many posts were essentially handed out by the emperor, and a number of imperial prefecture positions were established. Another significant change was concerning the **consuls** – traditionally during the Republic two were elected for the year, and the year was named after them. Under the emperors the year would start with two consuls in place, who each had the title *consul ordinarius*. These consuls, however, would usually give up their consulship around the middle of the year, and be replaced by new consuls, given the title *consul suffectus* (suffect consul). The suffect consuls could remain in post for the rest of the year, for 3-4 months or even just a month or two – Pliny held the post of *consul suffectus* in 100 CE for the months of September and October.

For more detailed information on the **cursus honorum**, particularly under the Republic, see:

[Cursus honorum - Livius](#)

[Cursus honorum - Wikipedia](#)

[Classics in the Classroom: Cursus Honorum - YouTube](#)



The traditional order of the basic **cursus honorum**, roles and age restrictions was as follows:

Post	Number per legion	Role	Minimum Age
Military tribune	6	Officer in army or with governor in province	20
Quaestor	20	Financial Officer	30
[Tribune of the Plebs*]	10	Legal aspects, could veto laws	27
Aedile	4	Care of city, streets, temples, games etc.	36
Praetor	8-16	Law courts, army generals	39
Consul	2	Rulers of Rome, army generals	42
[Censor**]	2	Taking the census, supervising morals	43

* The post of Tribune of the Plebs was traditionally only open to those of plebeian rank (as opposed to patrician rank, made up of the oldest aristocratic families). The power of veto meant it became a powerful political tool over time.

** Censors were ex-consuls, appointed for 5 years initially, which was then restricted to 18 months. The last censors were appointed in 23 BCE; after this, emperors would take on the role themselves.



Pliny's political career

Dates are all approximate. The information below is adapted, with permission from the author, from Appendix 1: Timeline (pgs. 249-252) Gibson, R. K. 2020. *Man of High Empire: The Life of Pliny the Younger*, Oxford.

Pliny held most of the traditional political offices during his career, and was also appointed by the emperor to certain other posts, particularly prefectures. He was appointed governor of the province of Bithynia-Pontus by the emperor Trajan, who had also awarded him the consulship.

Age restrictions were no longer observed under the Empire.

Post	Pliny in post
Military tribune	84-87 CE in Syria (for one, two or three years)
Quaestor	89 or 90 CE
Tribune of the Plebs	91 or 92 CE
Praetor	93 or 94 CE
Prefect of the Military Treasury	94-96 CE or 95-97 CE
Prefect of the Treasury of Saturn	98 CE (possibly for two years)
Consul (<i>suffectus</i>)	100 CE for September and October
Curator of Tiber and city sewers	106-106 CE
Governor of Pontus-Bithynia	109-112 CE