

THE OFFICE OF *A RATIONIBUS* IN THE ROMAN
ADMINISTRATION DURING THE EARLY EMPIRE*

by

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During the Early Roman Empire financial administration was, alongside military and judicial administration, one of three major pillars of Roman government¹. The actual functioning of central financial institutions responsible for the income and expenses of the state, both strictly imperial ones (the *fiscus Caesaris* and the *patrimonium Caesaris*) and those under the ruler's rigorous control (the *aerarium populi Romani/Saturni* and the *aerarium militare*), the formal and actual division of those institutions and the changes within administrative structure during the principate (the appearance of the *ratio privata* and/or the *res privata*) remain controversial to this day². The *officium a rationibus* is one of the least researched yet most important offices of the imperial financial administration. Because of the imperial freedmen and equestrians who held the post of a *rationibus*, as well as due to the great political and administrative significance of the office, its history was largely determined by the political and administrative history of the early Roman Empire. Under the principate the office carried very high prestige with it; evidence for that includes the huge fortune and political clout of M. Antonius Pallas and Ti. Iulius Etruscus, as well as the sum of the yearly salary awarded the equestrian *procuratores a rationibus*, active from the rule of Trajan onwards (initially they earned 200,000, later 300,000 sesterces).

It is worth emphasising that little information has been preserved on the *officium a rationibus* in ancient sources (particularly in narrative ones). Most of

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¹ BLEICKEN 1981: 135.

² E.g. KIENAST 2009: 381; BURTON, MILLAR 2012: 579; SCHEIDEL 2015: 235. Cf. ALPERS 1995; RATHBONE 1996; LO CASCIO 2000; EICH 2005; SCHMALL 2011.

what we know about the office, most often described in modern literature as “the ministry of finance”, comes from Statius’ poetic description and the accounts of Tacitus and Pliny the Younger, who concentrated mostly on the abusive conduct of the imperial freedman Pallas. Ancient authors were seldom interested in issues such as the hierarchy or specific duties or powers of offices, since they were of no interest to their readers³ who were more intrigued by other more “sensational” matters, such as the perversions of emperors, political and other scandals, palace intrigues, conspiracies and wars waged. The authors assumed their audiences would be familiar with socio-political details of the Early Roman Empire, not excluding administrative details, and were anyway apparently not overly interested in how exactly the Roman government worked⁴. Moreover, it is likely that the Romans did not conceive of the functioning of their *officia* in terms typical of modern models, based at least in part on a clear hierarchy and a strict division of duties and prerogatives. More information, not so much on the *officium a rationibus* as on individual officials, can be found in epigraphic sources which mainly formed part of honorific or funerary monuments and often list the careers of officials. *Cursus* inscriptions are of paramount importance in researching the administration of the early Empire, because unlike narrative sources, they tend to still be published today. This is beautifully exemplified by the inscriptions I have used, published recently in *L’Année épigraphique*, which detail the careers of new members of the *officium a rationibus*⁵.

While research into the *officium a rationibus* has been conducted since the 19th century, that is from the beginning of inquiry into *Altertumswissenschaft*, it has not yet attracted major attention from scholars. Contemporary literature on the subject certainly lacks a separate general study of the history of *officium a rationibus* under the principate. Not counting short encyclopaedic works, that office has only contextually featured in the reflection of historians, the subject matter of whose works could be subdivided into five rough categories: (1) the administrative, political, and economic activity of imperial slaves and freedmen; (2) the role of equestrians in central and provincial administration (mainly prosopographic studies); (3) the Roman administrative financial (or fiscal) system; (4) the organisation of the imperial palace; (5) the history of Roman administration in general. A dangerous tendency to somewhat unthinkingly repeating earlier findings without critical analysis of the sources can be observed in modern literature on the subject. It seems symptomatic that scholars today when writing on the history (and especially on the powers) of the *officium a rationibus*, keep drawing on the early 20th-century monograph of Roman administration by O.

³ CARNEY 1971: 2; OOST 1958: 125; WEAVER 2005: 252.

⁴ SALLER 1980: 46.

⁵ *AE* 1990, 69, 70; *AE* 2010, 284; *AE* 2012, 186. See also CAMODECA 2012: 305–321.

HIRSCHFELD, and on S.I. OOST's minor paper on M. Antonius Pallas, the best known *a rationibus*, written in the 1950s⁶.

In spite of numerous studies, many contentious issues remain unsolved, including the origin and exact duties of the *a rationibus* office, its structural transformations and its relationship to other financial offices. It is not quite clear whether during the early principate the office was only tied to the emperor's financial administration (*patrimonium* and *fiscus*), or also to that of the state (*aerarium Saturni*). Many questions still remain unanswered. What was the actual position of that office within the administration? How was it formed, and was it uniform throughout the Roman imperial times? Did the *a rationibus* always work close to the emperor as did court officials? Was the administrative and political position of the *officium a rationibus* influenced by the imperial freedmen, and, from Trajan's reign on, the equestrians who held it? Which career steps led the equestrian *a rationibus* to their posts? Were the *a rationibus* specialised according to the emperor's personal policy? Was there really a "process" whereby equestrians replaced freedmen as *a rationibus*, or were instead two *a rationibus*, one *eques* and one imperial freedman subordinate to him, active side by side as per the concept of "dual procuratorships" (*collégialité inégale; Pseudokollegialität*)? Chronologically, too, the functioning of the *a rationibus* seems uncertain. Clearly, then, many research questions surrounding the activity of the *officium a rationibus* remain unresolved or obscure; hence the idea of writing a monograph on that important imperial office, which will stop the yawning gap in historical literature. My doctoral dissertation is comprised of four chapters with an introduction, a section on conclusions, an index of sources (narrative, epigraphic, juridical and numismatic), a list of bibliographical references and an index of figures.

Chapter One, "Selected Methodological Issues", deals with the theoretical toolbox of a historian of the Roman administration during the principate, and especially with selected problems surrounding the critical reading of sources (narrative, juridical and epigraphic), as well as methodological approaches. Terminological reflection, largely ignored in literature so far, is a vital component of the chapter. Demonstrating the semantic distinctions between the several terms used to refer to the *a rationibus* and discussing their historical and cultural background are the fundamental objective of that part of the dissertation, in which I conclude a majority of modernised terms (such as *Reichsfinanzministerium*) for ancient institutions (including the office of the *a rationibus*) are risky to use, precisely because of the temptation to mis-apply certain present-day concepts and so establish a false continuity between modern and ancient structures. Based on an analysis of original terminology (both Greek and Latin), I find it most

⁶ HIRSCHFELD 1905; OOST 1958. Cf. DEMOUGIN 2005: 374 f.; CLAES 2014: 167, n. 21.

appropriate (or methodologically least problematic) to use the terms attested to in Ancient sources: *officium a rationibus* / *rationum*, and καθολικός⁷.

In Chapter Two, “The Functioning of the *a rationibus* Office within Roman Administration: Historiographic Issues”, I analyse the image of the administrative role of the *officium a rationibus* in European (mostly German and French) historical literature from the second half of the 20th century onwards. In that respect I recount the findings of the forerunners of research into Roman administration, as well as the influence of the two views found in historiography, the bureaucratic and the non-bureaucratic, on presenting the story of the office of *a rationibus*⁸. The issue seems vital, because historians of antiquity have often looked for regularities or patterns governing the functioning of Roman administration, and it can be concluded that the tendency to look at Roman institutional solutions through the prism of “bureaucracy”, well entrenched in scholarly discourse, has been decisive here, although Th. MOMMSEN’s 19th-century legalistic approach has had its effect as well. In the “bureaucratic” trend, scholars saw Roman administration primarily as a kind of an organised, formal system. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that scholars revised the way these issues had been viewed until then. Historians such as P. GARNSEY, F. MILLAR, R. SALLER, and P.A. BRUNT began to question the until then dominant tendency to analyse the early Imperial Roman administration through the lens of an elaborate and organised bureaucratic system. As S. DEMOUGIN aptly noted, they pointed out two fundamental and closely related elements: the role of the emperor, and the problem of patronage⁹. Scholars ceased to expound on the stable and organised activity of Roman institutions and the strict division of the duties of their officials. In the context of my chosen topic such concerns are valid, since both these theories, bureaucratic and non-bureaucratic, have considerably influenced writings on the history of the *officium a rationibus*. Some scholars have shown that office as part of the bureaucratic structures of the “emperor’s office” (*Kanzlei*), pointed to emperor Hadrian as the reformer who gave it over to equestrians, and written on the process of imperial freedmen being phased out of administration in the 2nd century. Unfortunately all these claims lead to a simplistic concept of the work of that office, which in Chapter Two I try to rectify.

⁷ The Greek title of καθολικός equivalent to the Latin *rationalis* was also an equivalent for the Latin expressions *a rationibus* and *procurator summarum rationum*; MASON 1974: 58, 141; EICH, PETZL 2000: 191–193. Other Greek equivalents of *rationibus* included [ἐπι]τροπος [ἄ]πὸ τῶν λόγων (*AE* 1913, 143a–b), ἐπὶ τῶν καθόλου λόγων (*CIL* III 6574, 7126 = *IK* XIII 651 = *ILS* 1344; *AE* 1997, 1425), ἐπὶ τῶν λόγων τῶν κ[αθόλου] and perhaps ἐπίτροπος καθολικός (*AE* 1976, 676 = ECK 1977: 230; *JGR* IV 1627 = EICH, PETZL 2000: 190–194). Moreover, the expression ἐπὶ τῶν καθόλου λόγων, confirmed not only in epigraphic but also narrative sources (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* VII 10, 5), could refer to an *a rationibus* or a *procurator summarum rationum* alike.

⁸ This chapter can also be found in a slightly changed form in KŁODZIŃSKI 2015.

⁹ DEMOUGIN 2001: 25.

At the beginning of Chapter Three, “The Duties and Role of the *a rationibus* in Roman Administration”, I focus on describing two imperial financial institutions, the *fiscus* and the *patrimonium*, each related to the functioning of the office of interest to me; it has been necessary to discuss the evolution of these two in detail because of the effect it had on the structural transformation of the central financial administration. Later on in the same chapter I analyse the specific duties and prerogatives of the office and its administrative structure, not merely reinterpreting our basic source in this respect, namely a passage from Statius’ *Silvae*¹⁰, but also drawing on epigraphic analysis to demonstrate the complex nature of the tasks assigned to the *a rationibus*. As a central financial and budgetary institution connected primarily to *fiscus Caesaris*, the *officium a rationibus* managed (or administered) the imperial income and expenses, but it was not the emperor’s cash registry and did not manage his accounts in the technical sense. It seems those technical tasks were carried out by the *procurator a loricata*, who closely co-operated or shared duties with the highest financial office. If there was a strict division of duties among the several offices of the central financial administration, it is difficult to demonstrate. The responsibility of the *a rationibus* was mainly to balance the income and expenses involved in the work of the several imperial and state financial institutions. They would control the status (that is, the expenses and income) of the emperor’s assets (*patrimonium* and *fiscus*), calculate the cost of maintaining the army and minting the coin, plan imperial expenses related to public construction, and oversee the work of mines (including those in Spain and in the provinces on the Danube) and the income from grazing the emperor’s cattle in Italy and from the huge imperial estates in Africa Proconsularis.

The *officium a rationibus* was active from the beginnings of the principate (likely as early as Augustus’ reign) till the end of the 2nd century¹¹, even though equestrian *a rationibus* can be still confirmed early in the 3rd century (under Caracalla). As a result of Septimius Severus’ reform of the central financial administration, the office transformed into a new administrative structure: the *collegium rationalium*¹². In my opinion there are absolutely no arguments for the notion that there were already *rationales* active under Marcus Aurelius, when the office of *procurator summarum rationum* was created next to the *a rationibus*¹³. Thus it would appear that in the late 2nd and early 3rd century the title of *a rationibus* was gradually replaced by that of *rationalis*, and there was no specific administrative

¹⁰ Stat. *Silv.* III 3, 85–105.

¹¹ The first *a rationibus* official to be attested to for certain is the imperial freedman Anthemus, active during the reign of Tiberius: *CIL* VI 8409c.

¹² See *CIL* VI 1585b = *ILS* 5920.

¹³ Contrary, WEAVER 1972: 264 f.; PFLAUM 1974: 65; CHRISTOL, DEMOUGIN 1990: 193; DOMERGUE 1990: 300; HERRMANN 1997: 117, n. 27; ECK 1998: 84 f., 92; EICH 2005: 162, 168 f.; HIRT 2010: 124; MOORE 2012: 221, n. 3.

practice of using the two titles (*a rationibus* and *rationalis*) interchangeably from the 2nd century on. In the same chapter I investigate the notion, formulated by H.-G. PFLAUM, and developed further in later literature, of a “system of dual procuratorships”, whose purpose was to explain the parallel presence of freedmen and equestrians in several branches of the procuratorial administration. In my view there are no sufficient grounds to believe the principle applied to the *a rationibus* as well. Near the end of Chapter Three I touch upon the important issue of the careers of the equestrians who held the post, as well as the question of the so-called “specialisation”, that is the experience in finances gained by the individual *a rationibus* during their civil service. To that purpose I follow the military and civil stages of the *cursus honorum* of twenty equestrian officials. The problem of “specialisation” has been investigated for many years and forms an important part of the reflection on the role of patronage and merit in the advancement of officials in the Roman administration, as well as on the personal policies of Roman emperors. In early historical literature (HIRSCHFELD, STEIN, and PFLAUM), it was stressed that Roman administration (and especially its procuratorial part) functioned according to bureaucratic principles (since Roman officials were professionals), the same as the “civil service in a modern sense”¹⁴. However, more recent scholars (such as BRUNT, SALLER, and BIRLEY) saw the issue in question differently, arguing that “such specialism was alien to Roman tradition”¹⁵. Now my analyses indicate the prestigious office of *a rationibus* was not just a random piece in the gradually forming equestrian procuratorial administration; in my opinion there are reasons to believe that when individual officials were chosen to be nominated to this highest ranking post, their experience (*experientia*) in financial matters could have been an important factor next to their social standing, personal abilities, patronage (*suffragium*) and the emperor’s will. The *a rationibus* included such officials as T. Statilius Optatus, called an *homme d’argent* by Sabine LEFEBVRE¹⁶, and I believe in their case what we see is exactly a form of directional administrative specialisation.

The dissertation is completed by Chapter Four, “Some *a rationibus* Officials”, which includes a prosopographic catalogue of *a rationibus* and *procuratores a rationibus* and so lays a foundation for all the discussion of the first three chapters. Making such a catalogue for the office under discussion was justified for two major reasons. First, historical material on the *a rationibus* is extremely representative. The *a rationibus* belonged to the political and administrative elite of the *Imperium Romanum* and so come up rather often in sources (mainly epigraphic ones), which is crucial in prosopographic research¹⁷. Second, the last scholars to have made such lists of officials, as early as in the 1960s, were K. WACHTEL for

¹⁴ SALLER 1980: 52.

¹⁵ BRUNT 1975: 141. See also SALLER 1980; BRUNT 1983; BIRLEY 1992: 16 f.

¹⁶ LEFEBVRE 1998: 264.

¹⁷ Cf. SABLAYROLLES 1999.

slaves and freedmen, and PFLAUM for *equites*¹⁸. An incomplete list of fifteen accounting officials (both imperial freedmen and equestrians, but only those active until the reign of Hadrian) can be found in the dissertation submitted in 1970 by Walter SEITZ¹⁹, and as early as the second half of the 19th century there were attempts by L. FRIEDLÄNDER and É. CUQ²⁰ to list all the *a rationibus* active during the principate. Therefore it was obviously necessary to both make a new and up-to-date list of *a rationibus* and to analyse it. The existing biographical and other notes on *a rationibus* and *procuratores a rationibus*, scattered in diverse and technical studies and often in need of updating, did not allow new conclusions on the way that office functioned within Roman administration.

Before the main body of that prosopographic chapter, I discuss certain basic methodological assumptions and issues, whereas its core part is a presentation of the known highest ranking officials to bear the title of *a rationibus* (variously referred to in literature as *Leiter des Ressorts*, *directeur d'un bureau palatin*, or "the head of *a rationibus*"): eleven imperial freedmen and twenty-six *equites*. Finally, the last section of the chapter describes the internal structure of the *officium a rationibus*, that is its subordinate officers (who appear in literature as *Unterbeamten*, *fonctions d'employés subalternes*, and "sub-clerical officials"): in other words, the slaves and freedmen who were the *tabularii*, *proximi* and *adiutores* in the office. There is also a separate list of the *servi et liberti Augusti* who also held the title of *a rationibus*, whom I have not included among the officials proper and whose function in the *officium a rationibus* was probably very minor. That list of all the officials known to have worked in the office of *a rationibus* allowed me to verify many opinions present in historical literature.

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¹⁸ WACHTEL 1966: 117–121; PFLAUM 1961: 1019. See also PFLAUM 1982: 109; IJSEWIJN 1987. Cf. LIEBENAM 1886: 90; HÜTTL 1933: 194; CHRISTOL, DEMOUGIN 1990: 199–201. Biographical notes on some *a rationibus* can also be found in *PIR*, *PIR*², and *RE*.

¹⁹ SEITZ 1970: 72–87.

²⁰ FRIEDLÄNDER 1888: 171–177; CUQ 1884: 394–397. L. FRIEDLÄNDER (1861: 6–9) was the first in modern historical writing to list *procuratores a rationibus*, but such accounts by 19th-century authors cannot in general be termed actual prosopographic studies, and only FRIEDLÄNDER's work was a real attempt at making a list of *a rationibus*.

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