# Marcus Valerius Corvus

The Sources, The Record, The Man

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Chapter 1

# Introduction

## The Case for Examination

In 349 BC, a young Roman patrician named Marcus Valerius stepped forward to accept the challenge of a Gaul who had been taunting the Roman army from between the two battle lines. Single combat of this kind was archaic even by fourth-century standards, a throwback to the heroic warfare of an earlier age that must have seemed theatrical even then. What happened next — if we believe Livy — was stranger still. A raven landed on Valerius's helmet and began attacking his Gallic opponent, obscuring the man's vision at critical moments. Valerius killed his opponent. He took the cognomen Corvus: the Raven.[1]

He went on to hold six consulships.[2] He served as dictator.[3] He commanded Roman armies in three of the defining conflicts of the mid-Republican period: the continuing struggle with the Gauls, the Latin War of 340 to 338 BC, and the First Samnite War. He reportedly lived to the age of one hundred. When he was sixty years old, Livy tells us, he challenged a younger man who had insulted him to settle the matter through single combat, and won.[4]

This is an extraordinary career by any measure. Yet Marcus Valerius Corvus occupies, at best, the margins of modern English-language scholarship on the Roman Republic. He appears in the footnotes of broader works, in the chronological tables, and briefly in encyclopedia entries. He has not

been the subject of a dedicated modern monograph. The single combat episode is occasionally cited as an example of archaic Roman military custom or Livian literary technique, but the man himself remains largely unexamined.[5]

The reasons for this neglect are not difficult to identify. The mid-Republic is a difficult period for historians. The sources are thin, late, and unreliable. The annalistic tradition that Livy drew upon was itself the product of generations of elaboration, political interest, and retrospective myth-making. Figures from this period are difficult to reconstruct with confidence, and the effort required often seems disproportionate to the certainty achievable. Scholars have tended to focus on periods where the evidence is richer—the later Republic, with its extraordinary documentary record—or on figures whose importance is more immediately apparent to modern readers.

But the neglect is not entirely explicable on methodological grounds. Corvus was important. His consulships span the period from 349 to 299 BC, fifty years at the heart of Rome's transformation from regional power to master of the Italian peninsula. He commanded armies during the campaigns that established Roman dominance over the Latins and began the long struggle with the Samnites that would ultimately reshape Italian politics. The Valerian family to which he belonged was one of the oldest and most politically consequential in Roman history. Understanding Corvus means understanding something about how Rome operated, what it valued, and how it constructed its own historical memory.

This book does not pretend to solve the problems that have kept scholars from sustained engagement with Corvus. The evidentiary limitations are real and will be frankly acknowledged. What this volume attempts is more modest: a systematic examination of the ancient evidence, an honest accounting of what it can and cannot tell us, and a placing of Corvus's career within the broader context of his age. If this work serves as a useful reference for scholars working on adjacent topics or as a starting point for readers who want

to understand why this man matters and what the difficulties are in recovering him, it will have done its job.

## Notes

1. Livy, Ab Urbe Condita, VII.26, is the primary ancient account of the single combat and the assumption of the cognomen. The same episode is treated by Valerius Maximus, Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium, III.2.6 and by Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae, IX.11.

2. For the full tabulation of Corvus's magistracies, including the six consulships (349, 346, 343, 335, 300, and 299 BC) and the dictatorship, see Broughton (1951), 127-135, drawing on the Fasti Consulares.

3. Corvus's dictatorship is attested but imprecisely dated in the surviving sources. Broughton (1951), 131-132, assembles the evidence. The most likely date falls in the 340s or 330s BC.

4. Pliny the Elder, Naturalis Historia, VII.156-158; Valerius Maximus, Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium, VIII.15 . The single combat at the age of sixty is reported by Valerius Maximus in the longevity section.

5. Cornell (1995), 345-368, treats the mid-fourth century BC in detail but does not give Corvus extended individual treatment. Oakley (1997-2005), II.158-196, provides the most detailed modern commentary on the Livian passages directly relevant to him.