Manius Curius Dentatus

The Sources, The Record, The Man

Marco Valenti

Chapter 1

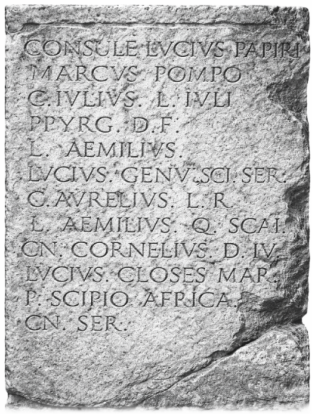
INTRODUCTION

No monograph exists on Manius Curius Dentatus. No biography has been attempted in any modern language. No single volume gathers the surviving evidence, examines the contradictions, and presents the man in full. This is a remarkable absence. Dentatus held the consulship three times, celebrated three triumphs and an ovation, defeated the Samnites in the war that secured Roman dominance over central Italy, turned back Pyrrhus of Epirus in the battle that ended the first major Hellenistic invasion of the West, conquered and absorbed the Sabine nation, commissioned Rome's second aqueduct, and engineered a drainage project whose physical remains still stand in the Umbrian landscape.[1] By any measure of consequence, he ranks among the most significant figures of the early Roman Republic. Yet he has never received a dedicated study.

The reasons for this neglect are not difficult to identify. Dentatus belongs to the early third century BC, a period for which Roman historical documentation is thin and problematic. The relevant books of Livy — the narrative backbone of Republican history — do not survive.[2] What remains are summaries, fragments, and the testimony of later writers who were less concerned with recording Dentatus as a historical figure than with deploying him as a moral example. He appears in Plutarch as a foil for Pyrrhus.[3] He appears in Valerius Maximus as an illustration of frugality.[4] He appears in Cicero as a rhetorical prop in a dialogue about old age.[5] He appears in Frontinus as an entry in an engineering report.[6]

Nowhere does he appear as himself. The man has been dismembered by his own tradition, parceled out across genres and centuries, reduced to a turnip and a saying and a number of *iugera*.

This book attempts a reassembly. Its purpose is to gather every surviving reference to Manius Curius Dentatus from the ancient record, place each within its proper context, evaluate each for reliability, and construct from the totality of the evidence the most complete account of his life, career, and legacy that the sources permit. Where the record is firm, this book will say so with confidence. Where it is ambiguous, the competing interpretations will be presented and assessed. Where it is silent, the silence will be acknowledged without apology and without the insertion of conjecture disguised as fact.



FRAGMENTVM FASTORVM CAPITOLINORVM
SAECVLI PRIMI A.C.

Fragment of the Fasti Capitolini. Augustan period, first century BC. Musei Capitolini, Rome

The Source Problem

Any study of Dentatus must begin with a frank acknowledgment of the evidentiary terrain. He died in 270 BC.[7] The earliest surviving writer to mention him substantively is Polybius, writing more than a century later.[8] The fullest narrative accounts come from Plutarch, Florus, and Eutropius, writing between two and five centuries after the events they describe.[9] No contemporary document, inscription, or literary text survives from Dentatus's own lifetime. The Fasti Capitolini and the Fasti Triumphales — the official state records of magistrates and triumphs — confirm the framework of his career: consular dates, triumphal dates, the censorship.[10] But these

are bare entries, not narrative. They tell us what happened. They do not tell us how, or why, or what it meant.

The principal ancient sources fall into several categories, each with its own character and limitations.

Livy's Ab Urbe Condita, composed in the Augustan period, would have provided the most continuous narrative. Books 11 through 20, covering the years 292 to 219 BC, are lost .[11] What survives is the Periochae — a set of abbreviated summaries compiled in late antiquity.[12] For Dentatus, the Periochae of Book 11 confirms the two triumphs of 290 BC and the Sabine submission.[13] It is skeletal but reliable as far as it goes, reflecting the broader Livian narrative that is no longer available for scrutiny.

Plutarch, writing in the late first and early second century AD, provides the most detailed surviving account of the Battle of Beneventum in his Life of Pyrrhus.[14] His interest, however, is Pyrrhus, not Dentatus. The Roman consul appears as a capable but secondary figure in a biography organized around the Epirote king. Plutarch also transmits apophthegms — memorable sayings attributed to Dentatus — in the Moralia.[15] These carry the hallmarks of the exempla tradition: compressed, dramatized, and shaped for moral instruction. Their historical accuracy is uncertain.

Cicero references Dentatus in at least five separate works. The most significant is the Cato Maior de Senectute, composed in 44 BC, where the character of Cato the Elder describes Dentatus scorning Samnite gold by his hearth. [16] This passage is critical not because it records an event reliably, but because it reveals the mechanism by which the Dentatus legend was transmitted: through Cato, who grew up near Dentatus's Sabine farm and explicitly modeled his own public identity on the dead general's reputation.[17] Other Ciceronian references establish Dentatus's status as a *homo novus*,[18] his possible Sabine origins,[19] and the legal consequences of his Lake Velinus drainage.[20] Cicero was not writing history. He was a lawyer and politician borrowing a useful exemplum. But his references, precisely because

they are incidental, often carry more evidentiary weight than deliberate historical accounts shaped by narrative agendas.

Valerius Maximus, writing under Tiberius, presents the turnip anecdote at Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium 4.3.5 as a formal exemplum of Roman frugality.[21] His version includes the most dramatic direct quotation attributed to Dentatus: the declaration that he can be neither conquered in battle nor corrupted with money.[22] The passage is openly didactic. Valerius Maximus was not interested in what Dentatus actually said to the Samnite ambassadors. He was interested in what the story could teach his readers about virtue. This does not render the anecdote valueless, but it requires the reader to distinguish between the probable historical kernel — that Dentatus was perceived as incorruptible — and the literary packaging in which that perception has been preserved.

Frontinus, as Rome's water commissioner under Nerva and Trajan, provides uniquely specific information about the Anio Vetus aqueduct in his De Aquaeductu.[23] He records the date of commission, the funding source, the appointment of the duumviri, and the fact of Dentatus's death five days into the assignment.[24] These are administrative details drawn from state records, not moral anecdotes, and they carry a correspondingly higher degree of reliability. His Stratagems also preserves a tactical detail about the Sabine campaign that appears nowhere else.[25]

Pliny the Elder contributes two distinct categories of information: the biographical curiosity of Dentatus's natal teeth[26] and the politically significant quotation about the seven-*iugera* allotment.[27] The dental detail is antiquarian trivia. The land quotation, however, connects directly to one of the defining policy debates of the Roman Republic — the distribution of conquered territory and the tension between individual accumulation and public equity. Pliny transmits this as a known and widely cited statement, which suggests it had been in circulation for generations, whether or not Dentatus actually spoke those precise words.

Florus, Eutropius, the author conventionally identified as Aurelius Victor, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Polybius, Cassius Dio, Zonaras, Orosius, Apuleius, Juvenal, and Columella each contribute smaller fragments.[28] None provides a sustained account. Each offers one or two details — a battle outcome, a land policy, a moral comparison — that must be fitted into the larger reconstruction like tesserae in a mosaic.

The Cato Problem

One figure stands behind the surviving tradition with disproportionate influence: Marcus Porcius Cato, known as Cato the Elder or Cato the Censor, born in Tusculum in 234 BC.[29] Plutarch records that Cato spent his youth on a small property in Sabine territory, near a cottage that had once belonged to Dentatus. The proximity was formative. Cato, observing the modest dimensions of the dwelling and absorbing local memory of Dentatus's frugal and disciplined character, resolved to model himself on the dead general.[30] This was not passive admiration. Cato actively constructed a public persona around Dentatus's example, and scholars have persuasively argued that much of what later writers report about Dentatus was filtered through, and in some cases originated in, Cato's speeches and writings.[31]

Cato's Origines — the first prose history written in Latin — does not survive except in fragments.[32] It is impossible to determine with certainty what Cato wrote about Dentatus. But the reconstruction attempted in a 2015 article in Classical Antiquity, drawing on Cicero, Plutarch, and the broader exempla tradition, identifies a probable Catonian prose text that unified the turnip-and-gold narrative with the Sabine farmstead setting and Cato's own role as admiring witness.[33] If this reconstruction is sound, then Cato did not merely transmit the Dentatus legend. He created it — or at minimum, he gave it the literary shape in which all subsequent writers received it.

This presents a methodological challenge. The historian must work with the material as it survives, while remaining conscious that much of it may reflect the ideological needs

of a man born thirty-six years after Dentatus died. The question is not whether Dentatus was frugal and incorruptible. Multiple independent strands of evidence — the land allotment policy, the public works funded from war spoils rather than personal enrichment, the absence of any ancient accusation of corruption — all point in the same direction. The question is whether the specific scenes and quotations that dramatize this frugality are historical or constructed. This book will address that question at each relevant point, but it proceeds from the position that the broad characterization is supported even where the specific anecdotes may not be.

Scope and Method

This volume is organized in two phases. The first, encompassing Chapters 2 through 10, presents a chronological account of Dentatus's career within the broader political and military history of the early third century BC. Dentatus cannot be understood in isolation. The Third Samnite War, the structure of Roman expansion, the Sabine world that was destroyed, the Pyrrhic invasion, and the infrastructure demands of a growing republic all form the necessary context. Each chapter draws on the full range of surviving sources, with discrepancies noted and assessed.

The second phase, comprising Chapters 11 and 12, examines Dentatus's legacy: the engineering works whose physical remains survive, and the moral tradition that transformed a historical figure into a symbol. This final section traces the afterlife of Dentatus in Roman literature, art, and political discourse, from Cato the Elder through the imperial moralists and into the Renaissance paintings that kept his image alive for audiences who had never read a line of Plutarch.[34]

A chronological appendix, a source concordance, and a glossary of terms are provided at the end of the volume.

The title of this book states its structure. The sources are examined first, because without understanding who is speaking and why, the record cannot be properly read. The record is then reconstructed as fully as the evidence permits.

And from that reconstruction, the man — or as much of him as two millennia have left us — is allowed to emerge.

Notes

1. The three consulships (290, 275, 274 BC), three triumphs (over the Samnites and Sabines in 290, over Pyrrhus in 275), and the ovation (over the Lucanians in 274) are confirmed by the Fasti Capitolini and the Fasti Triumphales, preserved in *Inscriptiones Italiae* XIII.1; see Broughton, T.R.S., *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic* (American Philological Association, 1951–52), vol. I, for the standard compilation. The censorship of 272 is confirmed by the same Fasti. The Anio Vetus aqueduct is documented by Frontinus, *De Aquaeductu* 1.6. The drainage of Lake Velinus and the resulting Cascata delle Marmore are attested by Cicero, *Ad Atticum* 4.15, and survive as a physical landmark near Terni in modern Umbria.

2. 2. Of Livy's 142 books, only Books 1–10 (covering the period to 293 BC) and Books 21–45 (covering 218–167 BC) survive complete. The gap between Books 10 and 21 — encompassing virtually the entire period of Dentatus's career — is the most damaging lacuna in Roman historiography. See Luce, T.J., *Livy: The Composition of His History* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 3–32.

3. Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus* 25–26. Dentatus appears as the Roman consul commanding at Beneventum, but the narrative focus is on Pyrrhus's tactical decisions and ultimate failure.

4. Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et Dictorum Memorabilium* 4.3.5. The anecdote is classified under the rubric *De Abstinentia et Continentia* (On Self-Restraint and Moderation).

5. Cicero, *Cato Maior de Senectute* 55–56. The passage

places the description of Dentatus in the mouth of Cato the Elder, within a philosophical dialogue about the consolations of old age. See Powell, J.G.F. (ed.), *Cicero: Cato Maior de Senectute* (Cambridge, 1988), for text and commentary.

6. Frontinus, *De Aquaeductu* 1.6, recording the commission and funding of the Anio Vetus; and *Stratagems* 1.8.4, preserving a tactical detail from the Sabine campaign.

7. Frontinus, *De Aquaeductu* 1.6, records that Dentatus died five days after his appointment as duumvir to oversee completion of the Anio Vetus. The appointment was made during or shortly after his censorship of 272 BC, placing his death at approximately 270 BC. See Ashby, T., *The Aqueducts of Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1935), pp. 54–60.

8. Polybius, *Histories* 2.19. Polybius was born around 200 BC and wrote his Histories in the mid-second century, placing his account roughly 120 years after Dentatus's death. On Polybius's chronology, see Walbank, F.W., *A Historical Commentary on Polybius* (Oxford, 1957–79), vol. I, pp. 1–6.

9. Plutarch composed the Life of Pyrrhus in the late first or early second century AD. Florus wrote under Hadrian or the Antonines in the second century AD. Eutropius composed his Breviarium under the emperor Valens around AD 369.

10. The Fasti Capitolini, displayed on the inner wall of the Regia in the Forum, were inscribed during the Augustan period but drew on older records. Their reliability for the early and middle Republic is debated; see Drummond, A., "Rome in the Fifth Century," in *Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd edn., vol. VII.2 (1989), pp. 113–171, for a cautious assessment. The

Fasti Triumphales, a companion inscription recording triumphal processions, are reproduced in *Inscriptiones Italiae* XIII.1.

11. Books 11–20 of Livy's Ab Urbe Condita covered the period from approximately 292 to 219 BC. Their loss is confirmed by the manuscript tradition; no complete text of these books has been recovered. See the discussion in Oakley, S.P., *A Commentary on Livy, Books VI–X* (Oxford, 1997–2005), vol. I, pp. 18–24, on the broader pattern of Livian textual survival.

12. The Periochae are brief summaries of each of Livy's 142 books, compiled by an unknown hand, probably in the fourth century AD. They vary in length and detail; some are a few sentences, others a short paragraph. They are not abridgments but outlines. The standard text is published in the Oxford Classical Text and Teubner editions of Livy.

13. Livy, *Periochae* 11. The summary confirms two triumphs in a single year and the submission of the Sabines with a grant of citizenship.

14. Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus* 25–26. For the conventions of Plutarchean biography and their implications for historical reconstruction, see Pelling, C.B .R., *Plutarch and History* (Classical Press of Wales, 2002), chapters 1–4.

15. Plutarch, *Moralia* 194E–F (*Apophthegmata Romana*). The genre of collected apophthegms was common in Hellenistic and Roman literary culture. On the reliability of such collections, see Stadter, P.A., *Plutarch's Historical Methods: An Analysis of the Mulierum Virtutes* (Harvard, 1965).

16. Cicero, *Cato Maior de Senectute* 55–56. The turnip-and-gold scene in this passage is the earliest

surviving version of the anecdote in its developed narrative form.

17. Plutarch, *Life of Cato the Elder* 2. Plutarch describes the young Cato observing the modest dimensions of Dentatus's former cottage and resolving to emulate his example. The passage explicitly links Cato's public persona to his proximity to Dentatus's memory.

18. Cicero, *Pro Murena* 8. The designation of Dentatus as a *homo novus* confirms that the gens Curia had produced no prior consul.

19. Cicero, *Pro Sulla* 7. The possible Sabine origin is noted without extended discussion. If correct, it carries implications for Dentatus's later conquest and confiscation of Sabine territory.

20. Cicero, *Ad Atticum* 4.15.5. Cicero represented the people of Reate before the Senate in a dispute over the downstream flooding caused by the drainage channel (*emissarium*) cut by Dentatus to divert the waters of Lake Velinus into the river Nar. The dispute was still active more than two centuries after the channel's construction.

21. Valerius Maximus 4.3.5. On the literary conventions of the exempla tradition and their relationship to historical fact, see Skidmore, C., *Practical Ethics for Roman Gentlemen: The Work of Valerius Maximus* (University of Exeter Press, 1996), and Wardle, D. (ed .), *Valerius Maximus: Memorable Deeds and Sayings, Book I* (Oxford, 1998), introduction.

22. Valerius Maximus 4.3.5: *refertote et memento me nec acie vinci nec pecunia corrumpi posse.* The quotation translates approximately as: "Report this and remember that I can neither be conquered in battle nor corrupted with money."

23. Frontinus, *De Aquaeductu Urbis Romae*. On Frontinus's career as *curator aquarum* and the administrative character of his report, see Rodgers, R.H. (ed.), *Frontinus: De Aquaeductu Urbis Romae* (Cambridge, 2004), introduction.

24. Frontinus, *De Aquaeductu* 1.6. The passage specifies the censorial commission, the funding from Pyrrhic War spoils (*ex manubiis de Pyrrho captis*), the appointment of the duumviral commission, and the five-day interval between Dentatus's appointment and his death.

25. Frontinus, *Stratagems* 1.8.4. The stratagem describes Dentatus dividing his forces to ravage Sabine territory, compelling a concentrated Sabine army to disperse in order to defend their homes.

26. Pliny, *Natural History* 7.16.68. The passage catalogues unusual birth phenomena and identifies the natal teeth as the origin of the cognomen *Dentatus*.

27. Pliny, *Natural History* 18.4.18. The statement about the seven-*iugera* allotment appears in Pliny's discussion of Roman agrarian land measurement and policy.

28. The minor sources, with their specific contributions: Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* 1.10.2–3 (Sabine conquest) and 1.18.28 (elephants in triumph); Eutropius, *Epitome of Roman History* 2.9 (Third Samnite War duration) and 2.14 (elephants); Aurelius Victor (attributed), *De Viris Illustribus* 33 (biographical summary, with the erroneous praenomen "Marcus" for "Manius"); Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 20.12.3 (elephant detail at Beneventum); Polybius, *Histories* 2.19 (Gallic expulsion); Cassius Dio, fr. 36.33 (turnip anecdote); Zonaras, *Epitome of Histories* 8.6 (summary drawing on Dio); Orosius,

Historiae Adversum Paganos 3.22.1 (Samnite defeat); Apuleius, *Apologia* 17 (frugality exemplum); Juvenal, *Satires* 11.78 (passing reference to old Roman simplicity); Columella, *De Re Rustica* 1. praef. 14 and 1.14 (farmer-soldier ideal and the seven-*iugera* allotment).

29. Plutarch, *Life of Cato the Elder* 1. On Cato's birth, career, and significance as a cultural figure, see Astin, A.E., *Cato the Censor* (Oxford, 1978), the standard modern biography.

30. Plutarch, *Life of Cato the Elder* 2. The passage describes Cato's youth in Sabine territory and his formative exposure to Dentatus's memory through the cottage and local oral tradition.

31. The argument that Cato shaped the Dentatus tradition is most fully developed in Gildenhard, I. and Viglietti, C., "Finding Examples at Home: Cato, Curius Dentatus, and the Origins of Roman Literary Exemplarity," *Classical Antiquity* 34.2 (2015), pp. 296–340. See also Astin, *Cato the Censor*, pp. 182–189, on the relationship between Cato's public image and the exempla tradition.

32. Cato's Origines covered Roman history from its mythological origins to the events of Cato's own lifetime. It is notable for being the first prose history composed in Latin rather than Greek. The surviving fragments are collected in Cornell, T.J. (ed.), *The Fragments of the Roman Historians* (Oxford, 2013), vol. I, with commentary in vol. III.

33. Gildenhard and Viglietti, "Finding Examples at Home," *Classical Antiquity* 34.2 (2015), pp. 296–340. The article reconstructs a probable Catonian source text by analyzing the common elements shared across the later versions of the turnip anecdote in Ci-

cero, Valerius Maximus, Plutarch, and other writers, arguing that these commonalities point to a single literary origin in Cato's lost works.

34. The Renaissance afterlife of the Dentatus legend is best illustrated by the paintings of the turnip scene by Jacopo Amigoni, Govert Flinck, and the circle of Rembrandt, as well as the fresco by Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. On the use of Roman exempla in Renaissance art and political discourse, see Haskell, F. and Penny, N., *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture 1500–1900* (Yale, 1981).