

The rich fabric of Roman politics would not be half so colourful without its many symbols, rituals and traditions. Of these traditions one of the most potent symbols of Roman power was the free, but humble-born attendants of high magistrates and public priests called lictors (after the Latin verb "ligo, ligare", to bind, to tie up), the binders. The lictors were public servants whose beginnings go back to the monarchy (753-509 BC) and beyond to an Etruscan origin. Chief magistrates (zilaths) in Etruscan cities (of which there were 12 in the Etruscan League) probably had one lictor each who bore on his shoulder a bound-up bundle of rods with an axe attached (the "fasces"). When all 12 zilaths met for religious purposes there would then have been 12 attendant lictors and 12 zilaths.

The kings of Rome borrowed this practice but by appropriating 12 lictors to themselves they were advertising that Rome herself stood on an equal footing with the entire Etruscan League. Lictors now and later were more or less confined to high officials who exercised the sovereign power of the Roman people, the "Imperium". The major exception was that certain priests such as the Decemvirs, the High Priest of Jupiter ("Flamen Dialis"), and the Vestal Virgins also had lictors who most likely did *not* carry the fasces. Another strange exception were the 30 lictors without fasces who summoned the ancient Curiate Assembly (The Assembly of the 30 Kinship Wards which in the late Republic dealt with adoptions, wills, and the investment of pre-elected officials with the "Imperium"). By the Late Republic the citizens of Rome did not actually meet in Curiae but let the 30 Curiate Lictors alone conduct this business. The tradition was still being used in the Imperial period since we know that the Lictors of the Curiae gave the Emperor Vespasian his "Imperium".

By the Republic, lictors with fasces came to accompany the following magistrates:

Dictator	- 24 lictors	(double-powered)
Consuls	- 12 lictors	(and Proconsuls)
Prætors	- 6 lictors	(and Proprætors)
Curule Aediles	- 2 lictors	(no Imperium oddly enough)
Quæstors	- 6 lictors	(but only when he had Proprætorian power)

The lictors were apparently organized into a hereditary college of 300 men subdivided into units of 10 (decuries) with their own officers (prefects). They received a modest salary supplemented by bonuses from the men they actually served.

The lictors' dress varied according to occasion. In Rome they wore the off-white toga of a Roman citizen except during a triumph when they donned a purple cloak and festooned their fasces with laurel leaves. The fasces themselves did not contain axes within the city proper. When lictors left Rome for Italy or the Provinces, however, a dramatic and chilling change occurred. First, the fasces received the axes, a symbol of the magistrate's power to execute summary capital judgement, and secondly the lictors put on military clothing by adopting the *sagum* (a reddish soldier's cloak). Perhaps under the cloak they wore red tunics with brass-studded black belts - a deadly sight even on diplomatic missions.

The lictors usually walked in front of their magistrate moving the crowd aside ("submovere turbam") and calling for the throng to pay proper respect - they remind one somewhat of the quasi-bodyguards that politicians and pop stars call "Handlers" today. They also walked single-file for the streets of old Rome and its forum were narrow and crowded. You will note that Hollywood usually depicts them walking side by side in pairs - a typical gaff.

The true purpose of the lictor can only be seen when the consul, for example, orders his lictors to unbind the fasces, untying the red-leather straps to release the rods so that some poor wretch can be beaten up. When outside the city the flogging could be followed up by a beheading since the axes would also be released. The dreadful, autocratic power of high-magistrates is truly seen in this raw, military exercise of authority. Within the city, civil rights (the Valerian Law of 300 BC) and the possible intervention of a friendly plebeian tribune might help you but when facing a magistrate in his duly appointed province abroad there was nothing to keep citizen or provincial alike safe from the violence of the unleashed lictors.