

There is a brief and relatively unknown period of late Republican history known as the Cinnae Dominatio (Tyranny of Cinna) which is jammed between the final consulship of Marius and the rise of the bloody dictator Sulla. Lucius Cornelius Cinna was for a short time "The First Man in Rome", holding four consulships in a row between 87 and 84 BC. The repeating of continuous consulships was a path to power already used by Marius, who had been consul 5 times in a row from 104-100 BC. Later Sulla, Julius Caesar and the Emperor Augustus would also use this constitutional device to hold control.

Cinna was a patrician friend of Marius and his faction, but after his praetorship c. 90 BC had served as a general (Legatus) under Pompey the Great's father, Pompeius Strabo, in the bitter war between Rome and her Italian allies (90-88 BC), wherein Cinna made a good reputation for himself. After Sulla had seized Rome with his army in 88, having executed the tribune Sulpicius and driving Marius into exile, Cinna, though a Marian, was still permitted by Sulla to run for the consulship of the next year, 87. Upon being elected, Sulla simply asked Cinna for an oath of support for his legislation before buzzing off to fight Mithradates in the East.

Naturally Cinna broke his oath and attacked Sulla's laws as soon as Sulla had gone. Cinna's pro-Sulla colleague then booted Cinna out of Rome after a battle in the forum, stripping him of his consulship and replacing him with Cornelius Merula. Thereupon, Cinna, with the support of the pro-Marian Carbo, raised troops on his own authority and attacked and seized the city of Rome for the second time in two years with a Roman army. In 86 Marius, having been recalled for a seventh consulship, ran amok and had hundreds of his enemies slaughtered—a slaughter which Cinna apparently tried to stop in vain. Luckily Marius soon died and Cinna entered into his time of dominance over the Republic.

Apparently, Cinna kept the Republican machinery functioning with some moderation, although illegally holding down successive consulships to enforce his will on the state, in this doing no worse than Marius had done. While in power Cinna had young Caesar divorce his plebeian wife, Cossutia, and marry Cinna's daughter, Cornelia, so that Caesar could be nominated to the Flaminiate priesthood. This marriage put Caesar in good favour with the rulers of Rome, but was to be a real source of danger after Sulla's victory in 82, when Caesar refused to divorce his wife on Sulla's

orders. Throughout this period Cinna was apparently quite popular with the equestrians and common people because of his reforms and financial legislation. He was an even bigger hit with the new citizens of Italian ancestry because of proposed changes to the way citizens were registered in the voting tribes.

Cinna even tried to deal with Mithradates himself so that Sulla couldn't claim the credit. He sent Valerius Flaccus, a patrician consul of 86, with two legions to put down the King of Pontus (it was illegal to have two patrician consuls but Republican values were crumbling at this period). Unfortunately, Flaccus was murdered by his Legate, Fimbria, and Fimbria was overwhelmed later by Sulla.

Realizing that it was necessary to build up a trained army to resist Sulla when he should return, Cinna, still consul in 84, raised an army of recruits and tried to take them across the Adriatic to fight in Illyria. The lads clearly didn't wish to go, so they lynched their consul. Without Cinna's leadership the upcoming war with Sulla was as good as lost.

Why is Cinna so important to Roman history? His importance clearly lies in this overwhelming fact: the Republic was under assault by great dynasts like Marius and Sulla, and later Caesar, but clearly it did not take giants like these to shake the state to its foundations. After all, even a second-rater like Cinna could become "First Man in Rome."