

Sextus Julius Frontinus

Frontinus, Sextus Julius Frontinus (? - 103/104 AD): Frontinus was Rome's water commissioner (*curator aquarum*) at the end of the 1st Century AD under the emperors Nerva and Trajan. Frontinus' books have made him the most famous of the Roman engineers. He has left us his written personal account of the water system of Rome: *De aquae urbis Romae*. In this book he describes in proud detail the sources, length, and function of each of Rome's aqueducts. Frontinus is best remembered for his statement (Frontinus, trans. By Bennett, 1961, p. 357): ". . . with such an array of indispensable structures carrying so many waters, compare if you will, the idle Pyramids or the useless, though famous works of the Greek." This quotation tells us a lot about Frontinus; he was a utilitarian public servant with little interest in beauty apart from function.

Frontinus was born in the Roman province of Gallia Narbonensis. He began his career as a horse soldier, but he first surfaces in 70 AD when he was a *praetor urbanus*. Only three years later he became consul; in between he had conducted military business (of unknown character) in Gallia. In 74 AD, he became governor of Britannia, where altogether a fourth of the armed forces of the empire, including 4 legions, were located. This command continued until 77 AD.

It is now regarded as a certainty that Frontinus was involved in military campaigns after Domitian's accession, namely in the first war against the Chatti. A further sign of the appreciation Domitian had for him is that he was given the post of *proconsul Asiae* in 85/86 AD. After this post we know of no further political public service for the next ten years. It is during this period that Frontinus dedicated himself to writing and produced his early works dealing with military matters and land surveying. The incentive for his later work might have been some official task given him by Domitian.

The reign of Nerva initiated a new period in the life of Frontinus. After first having been elected to a commission in charge of reducing public expenses, in 97 AD he was appointed *curator aquarum*. In any case, he became *consul iterum* in 98 AD, and *consul tertium* in 100 AD. When he died in 103/104 AD he also had the office of augur, which he probably received earlier under the Flavians.

Bruun speculates on why Frontinus was appointed *curator aquarum*. "One cannot help wondering whether Frontinus' expertise in land surveying played a part here. Knowledge of maps and land surveying would have been important qualities in the aqueduct administration, even if the lower echelons of the service normally provided the experts, and admittedly many (or most) senatorial officials did not, as far as we know, possess any specific knowledge which motivated their appointment. One could wonder whether Frontinus' appointment to *curator aquarum* could have had something to do with the planning for a new aqueduct, the one that the next emperor, Trajan, inaugurated in 109 AD."

Frontinus' career clearly shows him to have been one of the most successful and influential senators of the latter part of the first century, and we can even say that he was held in high regard by five straight emperors, from Vespasian (or even before, but about that we know nothing) to Trajan. Frontinus is important to historians of technology and public administration because of his book about Rome's water system. Note: This short biography relies heavily on Bruun.

References: Bruun, Christer, 1991, *The Water Supply of Ancient Rome: A Study of Roman Imperial Administration*. The Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters, Helsinki; Frontinus, Sextus Julius (trans. Charles Bennett), 1961, *Stratagems and the Aqueducts of Rome*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.