

Information on Hortensia

Biographical Briefing

Hortensia (pronounced hor-TEN-see-ah) was born around 70 B.C.E. into a wealthy upper class, or *patrician*, family. As a young woman, Hortensia received an extensive education, studying Latin, Greek, literature, music, and history. When she grew older, she became interested in public speaking, or *oratory*. In this way, Hortensia was following in the footsteps of her father, Quintus Hortalus (pronounced KWIN-tuss hor-TAL-uss). He was a well-known orator who made many famous speeches at the Roman Forum.

In 42 B.C.E., when Hortensia was in her twenties, civil war broke out in Rome. The three men who assumed power after Julius Caesar's assassination—Octavian, Lepidus, and Mark Antony—were waging war against those who killed Caesar. These powerful men were called *triumvirs* (pronounced try-UM-verz). In order to pay war expenses, the triumvirs decided to tax the 1,400 wealthiest women in Rome. The tax would amount to one full year's income, plus a "loan" to the government of a percentage of their properties. Hortensia felt that the tax was extremely unfair. She decided to lead a protest against the government's actions.

At first, Hortensia and a group of other women approached the female relatives of Rome's leaders. However, they refused to help. Hortensia then led a march through the streets of Rome to the Forum. She forced her way into the building, and proceeded to make a brilliant speech to the triumvirs, stating her case. She claimed the government had no right to tax women who had no political rights. In addition, she stated that it was wrong to tax citizens for war between Romans. Although she had made her points, the triumvirs ordered the guards to forcibly remove Hortensia and her supporters from the building. However, the huge crowd gathered outside began to riot in protest, and the leaders were forced to give in. The next day they announced that the tax would fall only on the wealthiest 400 women—and both men and women would be taxed. History remembers Hortensia as one Rome's most famous public speakers, or *orators*, during the last years of the Republic.



- How did Hortensia become interested in oratory?
- Why did Hortensia decide to lead a protest against the Roman government in 42 B.C.E.?
- What did Hortensia do to try convince the Roman government to change its tax policy?

Position: Hortensia believed that expansion helped Rome because it increased the Republic's wealth and that helped increase women's rights.

Main Points on Roman Expansion

Roman women enjoyed more rights than many other women in the ancient world. They dined with their husbands, attended respectable parties and events, and even influenced their husbands' political careers. Beginning in the early second century B.C.E., Rome's military conquests increased these rights even further.

During the Punic Wars, the Senate had passed the Oppian Law (pronounced OP-ee-an) to help conserve the country's wealth. This law stated that women could own only a 1/2 ounce of gold. They were also forbidden from certain privileges, such as wearing multicolored dresses and riding in carriages. After the Second Punic War ended, women requested that this law be done away with, or *abolished*. However, some Roman senators were against this idea. They claimed that if the law were abolished, women would begin to show off their wealth in order to achieve greater social status. Women publicly protested to influence the vote on this issue. The law was abolished in 195 B.C.E.

Soon after this, women won additional rights. They gained equal rights with men to sue for divorce. In the event of a divorce, the money or property the woman brought into the marriage, or her *dowry*, went back to her father so that he could care for his daughter. If the father had died, a legal guardian—who usually acted with the woman's approval—supervised the money. Women were allowed to run businesses, make investments, draw up wills, own slaves, and run households.

The increased wealth gained by the military conquests gave women more time to pursue educational interests. They often studied Greek, poetry, geometry, and philosophy, and learned to play musical instruments such as the lyre. These additional rights eventually led to an overall increase in women's social status. Beginning in 102 B.C.E., women could be honored with public funerals and be praised with glowing eulogies.



- How did the abolishment of the Oppian Law improve conditions for Roman women?
- What other rights did women gain after the abolishment of the Oppian Law?
- How did military expansion bring about an increase in the social status of Roman women?