

# THE CRISIS OF THE GRACCHI

The long, grim struggle with Carthage made Rome an imperial republic and the acquisition of empire brought far-reaching changes in all areas of Roman life. The empire transformed the economic basis of Roman society in ways that the Romans themselves found hard to fathom; everyone however, thought that the transformation brought change for the worse. Like many Romans, the historian Sallust, perceived social transformation in terms of a moral decline:

When Rome had grown great through hard work and justice. When Carthage, Rome's rival, had been toppled and every land sea had been opened to us, then Fortune turned against us and brought confusion to all we did. Those who had found it easy to bear hard work and danger now discovered that leisure and wealth which most men find so desirable were a burden and a curse to them. Lust for money grew among them, then the hunger for power, and these two gave rise to every other kind of evil. Greed destroyed honor, honesty, and every other virtue, and taught men to be arrogant and cruel. In the end, when the disease had spread like a plague, Rome changed: a government which had once surpassed all other in justice and excellence now became cruel and unbearable. **(Nystrom, p. 30)**

These words were written by the historian Sallust, a friend and political supporter of Julius Caesar. A few years later, Livy commented ruefully, *“How morals first gave way, then sank lower and lower, and finally began the downward plunge which has brought us to the present time, when we can endure neither our vices nor their cure.”* Ironically, the victory over Carthage caused would ultimately destroy the economic, political, and moral basis of the Roman Republic!

## The Effects of War

The first experiment in the new reality of the Roman Empire would be the new imperial province of Sicily. Using the excuse that Sicily must be protected against a possible return of Carthaginian power, the senate simply annexed Sicily as the first province of the Roman Empire. Sicily did not seem useful as a source of soldiers and the population was not Latin. On the other hand the island produced a large crop of grain. With the exception of few Greek cities on the island allowed to retain their independence, the Sicilians were not granted allied status; instead, it was their obligation to pay tribute in the form of grain. The Senator Cicero told the Senate, *“So far as the interests of the Roman nation are concerned, the general advantage of our province of Sicily is mainly derived from the grain which it sends us.”* **(Lewis and Reinhold, p. 349)** No one considered the economic consequences of seizing grain as a form of tribute. A Roman governor of the senatorial class was sent out to administer the island and see to it that the Senate and People of Rome received their tribute. A Roman tax known as the *Tithe* or “tenth” was imposed. The tax was supposed to be administered fairly, but rarely was in practice. The unfortunate Sicilians experienced Roman rule at its worst. A succession of

Roman governors got rich by looting the island and squeezing the population for every last *denarius*.

In 73 BC the Roman governor of Sicily Verres set a standard of corruption so high that the outrage finally reached Rome itself. Cicero took on the task of prosecuting Verres for corruption. His successful prosecution made his reputation as the greatest orator and lawyer of his day. Note the Perry Mason-like summation for the jury:

In just three years he so thoroughly despoiled and ruined that province that it can in no way be restored to its former state; indeed, it scarcely seems possible that even a lapse of many years and a succession of conscientious governors could rehabilitate it even partially. While Verres was governor of Sicily, its inhabitants had access to neither their own laws, nor our senatorial decrees, nor the rights universally allowed to men. Each Sicilian now possesses only as much as either escaped the notice of this very greedy, very lecherous swine, or remained after he glutted his lusts. (**Against Verres**)

Almost lost amidst the orgy of self-congratulation and triumphalism was the fact that no one, certainly not the Roman ruling elite, had given any thought as to the effects of the flood of booty pouring into the Roman economy. The great unforeseen consequence of imperial expansion would be the progressive pauperization of the great mass of Roman citizens. In other words, all the political instability and violence that would ultimately doom the Roman Republic would ultimately come from this economic disaster.

### **The Wealth of Rome**

But this enormous wealth was limited to a small class of senators like the infamous Verres. The main mass of the Romans and Italians were either starving peasants or debt-ridden farmers or people on the dole. Italy had become, as the historian Theodor Mommsen put it, "*a society of beggars and millionaires.*" In 62 BC Julius Caesar owed twenty-five million sesterces. A Sesterce is usually estimated conservatively as worth five cents in today's money. On that basis Caesar owed \$1,250,000. Later he is said to have bought a single pearl at \$300,000 for Sevilia, the mother of that Marcus Brutus who, in 44 BC, helped to assassinate him. Similarly, Cicero, who was only moderately well to do, could own six villas and buy a house for \$175,000. Cicero also paid \$25,000 for a single table of citrus-wood. Rome's republican constitution, which had been framed to govern a small city-state creaked and groaned as it strove to administer an empire. However the corruption and rapacity of the ruling elite is only one part of a much greater crisis.

### **The Problem of Slavery**

It is curious that the historians and moralists who deplored the decline of Roman morals never thought to connect that decline with conquest and slavery. Conquest brought fundamental economic changes: the transition from subsistence to capitalist production in agriculture and the substitution of slave labor for free labor. The empire also brought a flood of slaves to Italy. The first Punic war brought in 75,000 slaves (30,000 from a single city Tarentum), Aemilianus Paulus the victor over Macedonia sent

back 150,000 slave in 167 BC. Each further war brought in more prisoners of war and enslaved civilians. Many Greeks and Asiatic were far better educated than their Roman masters. In 146 BC, when Roman troops finally destroyed Carthage, the survivors (50,000) were brought back to Italy as slaves. When Gaius Marius defeated the Cimbri and the Teutones in 104 BC, a further 150,000 enslaved Germans were added to the labor market in Italy. Prices varied greatly, but many well to do Romans could afford hundreds of slaves. It is difficult to estimate the proportion of the Roman population enslaved at any point—probably the Italian population was roughly 30-50% slave by the time of Julius Caesar. In the American South in 1850 there were 51 slaves for every 100 free men by comparison. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx commented that the ancient state was primarily the slave-owner's state. We do not have to adopt the Marxist point of view completely to recognize that slavery changed everything for the Romans. Above all, slavery ruined the economic position of most Roman citizens.

### The End of the Roman Farmer

It was an article of faith among the Senatorial class that small farmers possessed the virtues of thrift and hard work that the state should encourage. The Romans also felt that small farmers made the best soldiers; they regarded every victory of the Roman army as proof of the superiority of the Roman social system. For that matter, the founding fathers of the American republic felt much the same way. Yet the actual policies of the Senate tended to destroy the very class of small farmers that they praised. For one thing, the constant demands of warfare kept farmers away from their land for long periods of time. The Roman army required vast supplies of cereal grains, oil, and wine, and these demands forced a change in the old subsistence style of farming.

Rome's old regional agricultural economy expanded into an imperial capitalist economy with an explosion of commercial activity. But this activity did not help the ordinary Roman farmer. Many farmers saw their property devastated in the 16 year long struggle against Hannibal. Because of long service overseas in the legions, many family farms were maintained by the very old and the very young and fell into disrepair. Some soldiers lost the taste for farming and sold out. Most of this land ended up in the hands of Senatorial families who organized it into large estates (**Latifundia**). These estates produced vegetables, wine, olive oil and other products at prices, which drove small producers out of the market. In parts of Italy, the countryside was almost de-populated except for gangs of slaves who worked the land by day and then were locked in barracks at night.

The acquisition of wheat-growing areas like Sicily, North Africa and Spain made it unprofitable to grow wheat in Italy—Sicilian wheat came to the market as tribute from a conquered area and the Roman state either sold this far below market price or simply gave it away. So the spoils of Empire did little to help the status of the average Roman. “*So numerous were the spoils coming from wealthy nations that Rome was incapable of containing the fruits of its victories,*” noted the historian Florus. As was the case with the Spanish empire in the New World two thousand years later, imperial growth did not trickle down to the level of ordinary citizens but it did contribute to inflation (as always when too much money pursues too few goods), which raised the cost of living for the poor. “*By the lowest reckoning,*” complained the first century writer Pliny, “*India,*

*China, and the Arabian peninsula take from our empire 100 million sesterces per year--that is the sum which our luxuries and our women cost us."*

Whether the farmer tried to compete with the large **Latifundia** or simply tried to make ends meet in the new cash economy by selling his labor at harvest time to his neighbors, he faced a changed economic situation brought on by the influx of slave labor into the Italian countryside. Poverty had grave political implications. If a man sold his farm for whatever reason, he would be removed from the census list as a property holder. This also removed him as a potential infantryman in the Legions and fundamentally reduced him to a lower social and political status. Once the farmer had sold out, and moved into Rome, he faced the problem of making a living. He might well have picked up construction skills in the army, but once again, free labor often had to compete with slave labor.

In the Roman Republic, it was not merely a matter of increasing poverty because economic decline led to loss of political rights: a poor man might be dropped into the *proletarii* in the popular assembly—those men with no property and only their offspring to offer the city. This growing desperate group ultimately de-stabilized the Roman political system because they simply had nothing to sell but their votes. Landless farmers from the countryside poured into Rome and their misery created a new volatile element in Roman politics—the Roman mob. In a very real sense, Rome was simply choking on its own empire—all of the political and social problems that ultimately destroyed the Roman republic began with this economic crisis.

### **The Gracchi:**

The Republic was caught up in what Christian Meier has called "*a crisis without alternative.*" The Roman Constitution had been designed to govern a city-state. It was well adapted for Italy, but not to governing an overseas empire. Imagine the strains that might fracture the Utah state legislature if some of its members were commanding armies and administering the economies of Washington state, California, New York and Mexico. The machinery of the Roman state was dominated by a small group of aristocratic clans who sat in the senate and dominated all the public offices. The fundamental political problem facing the Romans was twofold: 1. How to give some voice and political power to the newly wealthy elements of Roman society like the new commercial and financial class and 2. How to address the very real grievances of the Roman farmer.

In general, the conservative aristocrats who sat in the senate stubbornly refused to compromise with either the wealthy men just below them in the social order or to address the economic crisis afflicting the poor. Judged by modern standards, Roman reformers like the Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus seem very conservative and their agendas appear to be modest. It was very unusual for political discourse to address social or economic problems. There were no taxes,[at least for Roman citizens] and therefore no disputes about them; the economy was not a matter for politics; and social problems seldom came up in senatorial debates. The idea that a senator or politician might represent a particular economic constituency was as alien to the Romans as it is common for us. For the Senate however, it proved impossible to compromise. Political differences that seem almost trivial to us appeared to be enormous matters of principle to the conscript fathers of the senate. The basic form of the republic and its constitution could simply never be questioned. The senate was so concerned with upholding the traditional political order that they saw any

attempt to restrict their powers as an attack on the republic. As the historian Christian Meier argues: *“They therefore defended [the republic] without its being attacked, by so doing they seriously endangered it.”* (Meier, p. 27)

One politician, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus brought the crisis of the Roman farmer into the political arena, and Roman politics were never the same again. Tiberius Gracchus and his brother Gaius scarcely seemed to come from a family of potential social revolutionaries. They were grandsons of Scipio Africanus, the commander who defeated Hannibal. Nevertheless, he would launch himself on a course that would destroy the political stability of the republic. Elected Tribune of the Plebs in 133 BC, Gracchus introduced a land reform bill aimed at restoring the position of the small farmers of Italy. His idea was that no one should hold more than 500 acres of public land. The bill said nothing about private land **ager privatus**; one could own as much as one could afford. The bill dealt with hundreds of thousands of acres of public land (**ager publicus**) being illegally held by members of the senatorial order. The bill established a land commission headed by Tiberius Gracchus, his brother Gaius Gracchus and his father in law, which would have the authority to redistribute all surplus public land.

He claimed his intentions were conservative; he wished to improve the conditions of the peasantry, the traditional basis of the Roman army and the Roman citizen body. Plutarch recorded that *“When Tiberius passed through Etruria and found the country almost depopulated and its husband men and shepherds imported barbarian slaves, he first conceived the policy which was to be the source of countless ills to himself and his brother.”* (Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus*, p. 161) By putting people back on manageable farms, Tiberius restored them to the army lists, addressed the growing mob problem in the city of Rome itself, and took a step towards solving the economic crisis in the countryside. Gracchus argued forcibly for his legislation:

The wild animals that range over Italy have a hole, and each of them has its lair or nest, but the men who fight and die for Rome have no part of anything but the air and sunlight. They fight and die to protect the wealth and luxury of others; they are called the Lords of the earth but they have not a clod of earth to call their own. They roam the land with their wives and children, homeless and hounded.  
(Plutarch, *Tiberius Gracchus*, p. 162)

The later senator M. Tullius Cicero considered Gracchus to among the best orators Rome ever produced, but he saw him as a dangerous demagogue: *“I only wish that Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus had possessed political intentions as good as his oratorical talents. If so, his renown would have been the most splendid in the world.”* (Cicero, p. 254)

Writing 75 years after Gracchus’ death, Cicero concluded that the reforms of Gracchus were simply a cover for his personal ambition and hatred of the Roman senate: *“Gracchus’ tenure [as tribune of the plebs] was thoroughly turbulent. He took office only because he was so infuriated with the nobility.”* (Ibid.)

Gracchus seriously underestimated the opposition to the plan. Many senators, themselves large landowners holding illegal tracts of public land through representatives, opposed the reform as a radical attack on the principle of private property. Once again, as Cicero wrote: *“Lawlessness in individuals must be deprecated with equal determination. take Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus for example. Let us suppose that, as time goes on, this habit of disregarding legality begins to spread, and transforms our empire from the*

*rule of law to the rule of force...I am anxious about the survival of our country, which can only have permanent future existence if the institutions and customs established by our ancestors remain intact.” (Cicero, pp. 184-85)* The senatorial opposition was also well aware, as was Tiberius Gracchus himself, that a land re-distribution scheme involving settling 70,000 families on public land would have created a large mass of clients loyal to Tiberius. In fact country people flocked to Rome in unprecedented numbers to vote for the bill, which was quickly passed the popular assembly. “*Gracchus, immensely popular,*” wrote Appian, “*was escorted home by the multitude as though he were the founder, not of a single city or people, but of all the nations of Italy [his opponents said that] as soon as Gracchus should become a private citizen he would be sorry that he had done outrage to the sacred and inviolable office of tribune, and had sown in Italy so many seeds of future strife.” (Appian, pp. 8-9)*

The senate struck back in various ways. They bribed another Tribune to veto the bill. Gracchus responded by an unconstitutional act of his own—he persuaded the popular assembly to impeach the tribune. Cicero later used this disagreement between two tribunes as an example of the essential wisdom and moderation of the Roman constitution:

The tribunes have too much power you say. Yes, that is undeniable, but the power of the popular assembly has a much more cruel and violent potential. Yet, in practice, that potential sometimes makes for greater mildness when there is a leader to keep the assembly under control...For no board of [10] tribunes, surely, would ever be so outrageously constituted that not a single one of its members remained sane! Indeed, what caused the downfall of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus was the fact the he had an opponent on his own board, that, indeed, is what brought about his downfall: his removal of one of his own colleagues from office, because he had exercised his right of veto against Tiberius Gracchus. **(Cicero, *On Government*, P. 205)**

The senate then tried to pull the claws out of Tiberius' legislation by not appropriating any funding for the operation of the Land commission—under the Roman system, the senate had full authority over finances. At this point, the King of Pergamum in Asia Minor died childless and bequeathed his entire kingdom to the Roman people. Gracchus had the assembly pass another bill seizing this bequest to fund the land commission. This was another slap in the face for the senate, because it had sole control over foreign policy. Conservatives in the senate were alarmed by the passage of the bill, the deposition of the tribune, and the tremendous following Tiberius commanded among the poor. Tiberius clearly began to overplay his hand. His senatorial opponents decided to wait him out. His term as tribune was nearing its end, and with it his sacrosanctity; when he lost that, he knew he would be a dead man. His desperate recourse was to run for a second, unconstitutional term as tribune.

At this point, the consensus of the Roman ruling elite finally snapped. On the one side was Tiberius Gracchus and his supporters; on the other side were the senators, the patricians, and all of the large landowners. At stake was not merely the fate of land reform but the whole question of who ruled at Rome, the senate or the popular assembly. The issue was settled by violence. The senatorial opposition gathered around Cornelius Scipio Nasica, the *pontifex maximus*, senior official in charge of religious observances and

also Tiberius' cousin. The Gracchus faction held the capitol where the assembly met and the senate, according to **Appian:**

marched up to the capitol, Cornelius Scipio Nasica leading the way. When he arrived at the temple and advanced against the partisans of Gracchus they yielded out of regard for a distinguished citizen, and because they observed the senators following with him. The [senators], wresting the clubs out of the hands of the Gracchans themselves, and breaking up benches and furniture that had been brought for the use of the assembly, began beating them, pursued them, and drove them over the precipice. In the tumult, many of the Gracchans perished, and Gracchus himself, vainly circling the temple, was slain at the door, close to the statues of the kings. All the bodies were thrown by night into the Tiber. (**Appian, p. 10**)

In the riot, Gracchus and three hundred of his supporters perished at the hands of a mob of senators and their clients.

For the first time in almost four centuries, open violence and bloodshed occurred in Rome among members of the ruling elite. Nor was this violence a simple matter of **patricians** versus **plebs**: in this case, the social revolutionary Tiberius Gracchus was the **patrician**, while many of his senatorial opponents came from **plebian** families. “*All former quarrels,*” wrote Plutarch, “*which were neither small nor about trivial matters, were always amicably disposed, by mutual concessions on either side, the senate yielding for fear of the people, and the people out of respect for the senate.*” (**Plutarch, Tiberius Gracchus, p. 172**) The murder of Gracchus was a turning point in Roman history. It certainly signaled the end of political consensus at Rome. In the words of Appian:

Thus Gracchus, son of Gracchus who had been twice consul and of Cornelia, daughter of Scipio who had wrested supremacy from the Carthaginians, lost his life on the Capitol, while holding the office of tribune, as a result of an excellent scheme which he pushed forward by violent means. And this foul crime, the first perpetrated in the public assembly, was not the last, but from time to time something similar would always occur. The city was divided between grief and rejoicing at the murder of Gracchus, one group mourning for themselves and for him and for the present situation, which they saw not as ordered political life, but as violence and the rule of force. (**Appian, pp. 10-11**)

## Conclusion

How should we remember Tiberius? Was he a social revolutionary as Marxist historians portray him, or was he an ambitious renegade as the conservative tradition would have it—a Roman equivalent to the Greek tyrants? Since we do not know what he was thinking, he will always remain something of a mystery. His thinking was influenced by Stoic doctrines on the brotherhood of man and critics sniffed that he had spent too much time listening to Greeks, but it is at least as likely that he saw in the issue of land

reform a good way to attract support and become the “First Man in Rome”, as his grandfather Scipio Africanus had been.

The senate, faced with the sullen anger of the people, retreated and named a land commission to carry out some of the reforms that Tiberius had demanded, and Cornelius Scipio Nasica, the murderer of Tiberius was disgraced and forced into exile. Tiberius' non-conformist political maneuverings did help create what every senator feared—the rise of a popular cause in Rome as a viable political movement. More importantly, the taboo against violence had been broken and the toothpaste was out of the tube. The Romans found it impossible to make their constitution work in quite the same way again. Gracchus had turned to the people to challenge the authority of the senate. He failed, but the temptation would always be there for more ruthless and more clever politicians to try it again.