



THE LAST CENTURY OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

The Roman Republic was founded on the principle of collegial rule. Power was divided among many assemblies and magistrates. Except for the dictatorship, no magistracy was held by only one man. This was intended to prevent tyranny. Collegial rule also allowed the powerful Roman elite to satisfy their ambitions while serving the state. It was in the best interest of this class to share power. If any one man became too powerful, it would prevent other families from exercising their right to participate. For many years this system worked well.

THE GROWTH OF ROMAN TERRITORIES DURING THE SECOND CENTURY BCE

But the situation changed in the second century BCE. This was a time of incredible yet disruptive growth for Rome. Roman commitments overseas made it routine for politicians to govern far from Rome, with their armies away from Italy for years at a time. It was impractical for the old system of annual commands to work when campaigns took years to conclude. Yet the longer a commander remained with his army, the more loyal they were to him. At the same time, because many high-ranking politicians abused their power, especially in the provinces, the relationship between Romans and non-Romans grew strained.

In Rome and Italy, the number of slaves Romans held increased substantially. They were often employed on the very large Roman farms that developed during this period. As a result, the population of the city of Rome grew significantly as Romans and Italians left the countryside behind.

During this period questions began to be raised about the declining number and quality of men qualified for service in the Roman army. Unlike today's US military, the Roman army had a minimum property qualification. Those who did not meet it were unable to enlist. Presumably, increasing the number of men qualified to serve would result in better armies.

TIBERIUS GRACCHUS

As a newly elected tribune (*tribūnus plēbis*) of the people in 133 BCE, Tiberius Gracchus attempted to address this problem of a need for more men with the appropriate property qualifications to serve in the militia with a plan to distribute publicly owned land to Roman citizens. A number of politicians supported this proposal. But it was also controversial. Many wealthy citizens, including senators, were using far more than the (long-ignored) legal allotment. More disturbing were the extraordinary actions Tiberius Gracchus took to ensure the bill would pass. He sidestepped the Senate and took his bill directly to the Popular Assembly. When another tribune vetoed the submission of his bill, Tiberius tried to expel him from the office of tribune. These actions were ultimately perceived by many of the Roman elite as a threat to state security. When Gracchus



stood for election for an unprecedented consecutive term, serious rioting began in Rome, and he and many of his supporters lost their lives. Even though the land redistribution bill was enacted, the events surrounding Tiberius Gracchus's term set a dangerous example.

POPULĀRĒS AND OPTIMĀTĒS

Later Roman politicians, following the example of Tiberius Gracchus, exploited the office of tribune. They were labeled *populārēs*—men who relied on popular support for political influence. Circumventing the traditional position of the Senate as advisors for legislation and providers of funds, *populārēs* appealed directly to the assemblies themselves. Politicians who wished to keep the Senate at the center of influence were called *optimātēs*.

Though weaker, the Roman Senate and elite remained very influential. Roman society was traditional and conservative, and the nobility still dominated politics. Even *populāris* politicians came from this elite group. Still, the tribuneship was used to force through legislation that the Senate would oppose. Though their methods polarized the political world, their bills often addressed real needs such as distributing land to veteran soldiers and stabilizing the cost of grain.

GAIUS GRACCHUS

Nine years after the death of his older brother, Gaius Gracchus served as tribune (123–122 BCE). His legislation was designed to appeal to a number of groups: the urban poor, the *equitēs*, and military veterans. He had laws passed that sold grain at half-price to the urban poor, that transferred the courts that dealt with cases of corruption by provincial governors from the Senate to the *equitēs*, and that created land holdings for veterans outside of Italy. Gaius's unsuccessful attempt to be elected as tribune for a third consecutive year resulted in a riot. To deal with these protestors, the *senātūs cōsultum ultimum*, the “final decree of the Senate,” was passed, which empowered the consuls to do what was necessary to protect and preserve the state. As a result of this decree, Gaius and three thousand of his supporters were killed. By circumventing the Senate and taking legislation directly to the people, the Gracchi brothers had set a dangerous precedent that would be followed by other politicians determined to have their way by whatever means possible.

GAIUS MARIUS

Populāris methods also allowed men outside the Roman nobility, such as Gaius Marius, to become influential. Marius was a talented general, and his victories made him so popular that he was elected to the consulship for an unprecedented five consecutive terms (107–101 BCE). One of Marius's most consequential initiatives was that he opened the army to all Roman citizens, regardless of whether they owned property or not. Marius chose to enlist men from all classes because he needed recruits, and they clearly fought loyally and well. But, unlike today's professional military, Roman soldiers did not receive any benefits beyond the small stipend they were paid and whatever rewards their general granted them. Marius and many generals to follow knew it was beneficial to reward these men with land. Yet the Senate generally did not support such



legislation because it would grant the general too much influence. Senatorial opposition to the generals' proposals caused soldiers to value their loyalty to their commander more than to the Roman Senate and to the state itself.

CORNELIUS SULLA

Sulla had distinguished himself as a commander during the Social War. This was a rebellion of Rome's allies that ended by granting Italians Roman citizenship. Sulla's success contributed to his election as consul in 88 BCE. He anticipated winning even more glory in the command he was assigned against Mithridates VI, king of Pontus (today, northern Turkey). But Marius, an enemy of Sulla, also desired this command. While Sulla was away fighting some of the last resistance from the Social War, Marius and his ally Cinna had a motion passed that granted Marius the command against Mithridates instead. When the news reached Sulla, he persuaded his soldiers to march with him and took Rome by force. He then proceeded east to fight Mithridates.

During Sulla's absence, Rome was in chaos. Although Cinna and Marius were driven from the city, they recaptured it with their soldiers. Both men then rid Rome of their political enemies. Their actions, however, would be no match for the ruthlessness that Sulla would show on his return to Rome in 82 BCE. By this time both Marius and Cinna were dead, Marius of natural causes and Cinna at the hands of mutinous soldiers. Sulla again took Rome by force at the battle of the Colline Gate. He was aided in his efforts to attain supremacy by Crassus and the future Pompey the Great.

Sulla's reign was truly one of terror. He published a list of enemies who were stripped of citizenship and whose property was to be confiscated by the state. The proscription list essentially placed a bounty on the heads of thousands of citizens, justified or not, and provided a way to reward Sulla's supporters while also eradicating his opponents. He also had a law passed that made him dictator for an indefinite period of time. Despite using the traditional magistracy of the dictatorship, Sulla distorted its original intent, which was to guide the city during an emergency not to exceed a period of six months. This office, which Sulla held for two years (82–80), gave him the authority to do as he wished.

SULLA'S REFORMS

Sulla's government reforms were extensive. In general, he tried to restore order by limiting potential abuses of Roman magistracies. These reforms included increasing the numbers of certain magistracies so that provincial service would be limited to one year at a time. He also restricted the powers of the tribune in two important ways: tribunes would have to receive senatorial approval before submitting a bill to the popular assembly, and tribunes could hold no other magistracy. By doubling the size of the Senate, he favored his supporters and diluted the opposition.

In 80 BCE Sulla resigned all power and retired to his villa in Campania. He died soon afterwards, probably due to complications from a life of heavy drinking. He left a terrible legacy. Despite his attempts to stabilize Roman government, his ruthlessness and violence set a precedent that others would follow. Sulla also made clear just how powerful a politician could be with an army supporting him.



THE RISE OF POMPEY THE GREAT

Shortly after Sulla's death in 78 BCE, civil unrest occurred again. In Spain the anti-Sullan governor Sertorius led an army of exiled Romans and Spanish tribesmen in revolt. Their resistance was serious enough that the Senate sent Pompey and his legions to Spain to quell the rebellion though he was a private citizen. Pompey's appointment was even more remarkable because he had not yet been elected to any Roman magistracy. He had, however, made himself prominent as a commander supporting Sulla in the 80s, and he remained influential despite his youth. Pompey and Metellus, governor of the province Farther Spain (*Hispania Ulterior*), coordinated efforts against Sertorius, who was assassinated in 74 and whose army was finally defeated in 72.

WARS AGAINST MITHRIDATES AND SPARTACUS

At the same time Rome was fighting two other wars: the one was against Mithridates, to be concluded in 72, and the other was a local war, against Spartacus. Spartacus was a Thracian gladiator and slave who in 73 led an uprising against Rome. His army defeated several Roman armies but was eventually conquered by Roman forces led by the praetor Crassus who, like Pompey, was given *imperium*, the right of command, with special privileges and extensive resources. Though necessity demanded such arrangements, the Romans were right to suspect the potential for abuse of power that these extraordinary commands provided.

The decade ended peacefully with all major wars against Rome concluded. As consuls for 70 BCE, Pompey and Crassus revoked many of Sulla's reforms, including restrictions on tribunes. But this peace would not last because problems contributing to political instability had not really been resolved. A greater willingness to resort to violence to advance one's agenda and the disregard for self-restraint and tradition were Sulla's true legacies to the state.

POMPEY GIVEN IMPERIUM

In 67 BCE Pompey was again called upon to serve the state. Piracy had risen in the Mediterranean following on yet another war with Mithridates, a war that had resumed in 69. Pompey was asked to deal with the pirates. He was given *imperium* with powers that gave him greater authority than any of the (more senior) Roman governors in that region. He concluded the war in less than three months, and his allies in Rome extended his *imperium* to the war against Mithridates. Both of these commands were granted by the motions of tribunes and passed despite strong opposition within the Senate.

THE RISE OF JULIUS CAESAR AND MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO

Around this period Julius Caesar began to rise to prominence. He was a member of a very old, patrician Roman family that traced its origins back to Aeneas and Romulus but had not been important for some time. Politically he clearly was aligned with *populāris* interests and methods. In addition, he was a nephew (by marriage) of Marius and throughout his political career demonstrated his opposition to Sulla. Caesar first became well known during the aedileship he held in 65 BCE. Aediles were responsible for running state festivals. Ambitious politicians wishing to become widely known spent huge amounts of money on lavish entertainments. Caesar went into

great debt doing this. Though his generous spending paid off by his being elected to a praetorship and then to *Pontifex Maximus* (the highest office in Roman state religion, which was principally concerned with preserving “peace with the gods,” the *pāx deōrum*), at the same time he won a reputation for outrageous behavior. He was, for example, suspected of supporting Catiline, whose conspiracy against Rome was uncovered by Cicero, one of the consuls of 63 BCE.

Cicero’s background, philosophy, and political style were about as different from Caesar’s as can be imagined. He became known through the eloquence and courage he demonstrated in court, first defending a man victimized by Sulla’s proscriptions, Sextus Roscius of Ameria, and then prosecuting the corrupt governor of Sicily, Verres. Another speech that brought Cicero fame was his defense of Archias, a poet and mentor, who was accused of assuming Roman citizenship illegally.

Cicero strongly believed in the ideals of the Republic. This is clear in his opposition to Catiline. Catiline had been frustrated in two unsuccessful campaigns for the consulship, and in 63 BCE Cicero uncovered his plan to overthrow the state. He and many of his supporters withdrew from Rome after Cicero dramatically revealed his plans during a Senate meeting in the first of four speeches he wrote against him. The first Catilinarian oration is a model of Roman rhetorical style. Catiline later died in battle against a Roman army. A number of prominent Romans were implicated in the conspiracy and were executed by Cicero, who had been authorized to do whatever was necessary to preserve the state through the passage of the *senātūs cōsultum ultimum*.



THE FIRST TRIUMVIRATE

By the end of the 60s BCE, Pompey and Crassus had become political outsiders unable to get the legislation they each favored passed in the Senate. They joined Caesar in a political arrangement often referred to as the First Triumvirate. Pompey and Crassus would support Caesar for the consulship, and Caesar would ensure that their legislation was passed.

By the time of Caesar’s election to the consulship for 59 BCE, this political arrangement was common knowledge. The optimate faction tried to block it by arranging for Marcus Bibulus to be elected as Caesar’s consular colleague. But Caesar ensured that Bibulus was publically humiliated early in their term. Bibulus withdrew to his house for the remainder of the year and occupied himself declaring unfavorable omens, which would invalidate all of Caesar’s actions as consul. But Caesar ignored these, passed his allies’

This marble bust idealizes Caesar’s facial features but does recreate his receding hairline. Tradition holds that Caesar was fond of wearing a wreath so as to hide his baldness.



legislation, and was given the command over Cisalpine and Transalpine Gaul. Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar continued to work together. Caesar and Pompey strengthened their ties when Pompey married Caesar's daughter.

Caesar very quickly ensured that Rome was drawn into war with Gallic tribes after he took his command in Gaul in 58 BCE. He, Crassus, and Pompey would meet in 56 at Luca, a small town just outside Roman territory, to negotiate continuing the triumvirate. Caesar would keep his command of the Gallic provinces, Crassus would receive Syria, and Pompey would govern the Spanish provinces.

During this period Cicero was driven into exile on the pretext of his having used the *senātūs cōsultum ultimum* to execute Romans without due process. The real reason was that the tribune Clodius Pulcher was exacting revenge for humiliating testimony Cicero gave against him years earlier. Cicero would be obligated to support Pompey, Caesar, and Crassus because they allowed him to return to Rome. Around this time Catullus wrote invective poems against some politicians, such as Caesar and Pompey, and ironical or unflattering poems to others, such as Cicero.

The "First Triumvirate" would begin to dissolve soon after 56 BCE. Caesar's daughter Julia died in 54, and Pompey would soon marry the daughter of a prominent optimate. Crassus would die during the Roman defeat at Carrhae in 53. Due to rioting, elections for 52 could not be held, and Pompey was appointed sole consul with the support of the optimates. The situation suggested that Pompey now was allied with the optimates.

CAESAR IN GAUL AND HIS RETURN TO ROME

Caesar's command in Gaul was incredibly successful. There he wrote *Dē bellō Gallicō*, where he reported on the wars he fought, as well as the customs and religion of the Gallic tribes, in elegant, concise language. With his victory at Alesia in 52 BCE, Transalpine Gaul was made peaceful and Roman influence there grew steadily from the 50s onward. The wars made Caesar tremendously wealthy and even more popular with the Roman people. However, his political opponents grew still more hostile.

Caesar's political survival depended on being able to move directly from his governorship to an elected magistracy. Otherwise, he would be open to prosecution by his political enemies. But special legislative action would be required for this to happen—contenders for political office had to declare their candidacies in person at Rome. This would require Caesar to lay down his *imperium*, the power of command. As the end to Caesar's governorship drew closer, debate over his candidacy grew more heated. Caesar was ordered by the Senate to surrender his legions while Pompey was allowed to retain his. When Caesar refused to obey, the Senate declared him a public enemy. In 49 BCE he led his army into Italy, crossing the Rubicon River, the formal boundary between Cisalpine Gaul and Roman territory. Civil war had begun again.



THE DEATH OF POMPEY AND THE ASSASSINATION OF JULIUS CAESAR

As Caesar marched on Rome, Pompey and his supporters withdrew to the Eastern provinces. Caesar soon won a decisive victory over Pompey at Pharsalus in 48 BCE. Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was murdered by men hoping to win Caesar's favor. Caesar's victory over his opponents was final by 46.

Rome would not be at peace for long. Although Caesar elected not to follow the example of Sulla by proscribing and executing his enemies, the extending of *clēmētia* ("mercy") to his opponents and allowing them to live, made these individuals resentful, for they now felt obligated to him. In addition, little could be done politically without his approval. Finally, in February 44 BCE, he declared himself *dictātor perpetuō*, "dictator for life." In addition, he was voted his own priest as if he were a god. One month later, on the Ides of March, Caesar was assassinated by a well-coordinated conspiracy made up of Caesar's old enemies as well as his supporters.

Caesar's assassins hoped that the Republic would be restored after Caesar's death. But this was naïve. The recent past had shown that controlling Rome depended on controlling the urban population and army. The next generation would consist of civil wars. The eventual victor, Caesar's heir Octavian, would claim that he restored the Republic, while in reality, he ruled alone.

ROSEMARY MOORE
The University of Iowa