

Intrigue, Tiberius Gracchus and Roman Politics

"To What Extent did the Murder of Tiberius Popularize Violence in Roman Politics?"

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I.) Introduction:

After the abolition of the Roman Kingdom in 509BC, political power rested in the hands of the senatorial class. Some three and a half centuries later, the concentration of land ownership in the hands of the senatorial class and the suffering of the “Populus Romanus”¹ had created an unstable political environment. A revolutionary by the name of Tiberius Gracchus emerged in 137 BC² and tried to enact land reform by circumventing the Senate and going straight to the people³. When the Senate murdered this populist leader in 133BC, it set a precedent for the future treatment of political opposition and the use of violence in the Roman political sphere.

¹ Latin for “the People of Rome”.

² Start of Political Career as a quaestor for Gaius Mancinus.

³ Riddle, John M, *Tiberius Gracchus: Destroyer or Reformer of the Republic?* 12.

II.) Tiberius Gracchus's rival; Marcus Octavius

Cassius Dio, "Roman History" Book 24:

ὅτι Μάρκος Ὀκτάουιος τῷ Γράκῳ διὰ φιλονεικίαν συγγενικὴν ἐκὼν ἀντιγωνίζετο. καὶ ἐκ τούτου οὐδὲν μέτριον ἐπράττετο, ἀλλ' ἀντιφιλονεικοῦντες περιγενέσθαι μᾶλλον ἀλλήλων ἢ τὸ κοινὸν ὠφελεῖσαι, πολλὰ μὲν καὶ βίαια, ὥσπερ ἐν δυναστείᾳ τινὶ ἀλλ' οὐ δημοκρατίᾳ, ἐπραξαν, πολλὰ δὲ καὶ ἄτοπα, ὥσπερ ἐν πολέμῳ τινὶ ἀλλ' "

English Translation⁴:

Marcus Octavius, because of a family feud with Gracchus, willingly became his opponent. Thereafter there was no semblance of moderation; but zealously vying, as they did, each to prevail over the other rather than to benefit the state, they committed many acts of violence more appropriate in a despotism than in a democracy, and suffered many unusual calamities appropriate to war rather than to peace. For in addition to their individual conflicts there were many who banded together and indulged in bitter abuse and conflicts, not only throughout the city generally.

Annotation:

Dio Cassius⁵ describes the rivalry between Marcus Octavius and Tiberius Gracchus as a microcosm of the broader conflict between the senatorial and plebeian classes. Their "family rivalry.... (explains) their difference politically"⁶, with Tiberius appealing to both the equestrian class and the plebeians in order to create a new political power base⁷ to challenge the traditional power base of Octavius among the senatorial class. To counter this threat, Octavius resorted to "acts of violence"⁸, establishing a playbook for dealing with populist leaders that was followed by later aristocrats who faced populist uprisings.

⁴ Bill Thayer. "Cassius Dio, - *Fragments of Books 22 to 29*".

⁵ Roman Historian who wrote in Greek, born in 155AD.

⁶ Riddle, John M, *Tiberius Gracchus: Destroyer or Reformer of the Republic?* 27.

⁷ Scullard, Howard Hayes, *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome* 32.

⁸ *Cassius Dio - Fragments of Books 22 to 29*.

III.) Rome's Tense Political Climate

Livy, Periochae 58:

Tib. Sempronius Gracchus trib. pleb. cum legem agrariam ferret adversus voluntatem senatus et equestris ordinis: nequis ex publico agro plus quam mille iugera possideret, in eum furorem exarsit ut M. Octavio collegae causam diversae partis defendenti potestatem lege lata abrogaret, seque et C. Gracchum fratrem et Appium Claudium socerum triumviros ad dividendum agrum crearet.

Tot indignitatibus commotus graviter senatus, ante omnis T. Annius consularis. Qui cum in senatu in Gracchum perorasset, raptus ab eo ad populum delatusque plebi, rursus in eum pro rostris contionatus est.

English Translation⁹:

Against the wishes of the Senate and the equestrian order, the tribune of the plebs Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus carried a land bill: no one was to own more than one thousand *iugera* of public land. In a rage, Gracchus removed by a special enactment his colleague Marcus Octavius because he had defended the opposing point of view; and he had himself, his brother Gaius Gracchus, and his father-in-law Appius Claudius elected as members of a triumviral board to divide land.

The Senate, especially former consul Titus Annius, was very disturbed by these actions. When Annius had delivered a speech against Gracchus in the Senate, he was arrested by Gracchus and accused before the plebeians, and Annius now made a public speech against him.

Annotation:

Livy¹⁰ refers to Tiberius' actions as angering both the "*senatus et equestris ordinis*", implying that the equestrian order had equal stake in terms of economic prosperity¹¹ as the senatorial class. By having Annius "accused in front of the plebeians", Tiberius challenges the power of the senate and equestrian class with the power of the "*Populus Romanus*"¹². This power struggle between senate, equestrians, and the Roman people would prompt the use of violence in order to maintain the power balance.¹³

⁹ Lendering, Jona. "Livy: Periochae 56-60." *Pliny the Younger – Livius*, 58.

¹⁰ A Roman historian, born in 64AD.

¹¹ Scullard, Howard Hayes. *From the Gracchi to Nero: a History of Rome from 133 B.C. to A.D. 68*, 2-5.

¹² Latin for "The People of Rome"

¹³ *Cassius Dio - Fragments of Books 22 to 29.*

IV.) Intrigue and Tiberius's Murder

Plutarch, "Parallel Lives; The Life of Tiberius Gracchus" Volume X:

τῶν δ' ἀπωτέρω θαυμαζόντων τὰ γινόμενα καὶ πυνθανομένων, ὁ Τιβέριος ἤψατο τῇ χειρὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς, ἐνδεικνύμενος τῇ ὄψει τὸν κίνδυνον, ἐπεὶ τῆς φωνῆς οὐκ ἐπήκουον. οἱ δ' ἐναντίοι τοῦτ' ἰδόντες, ἔθεον πρὸς τὴν βουλὴν ἀπαγγέλλοντες αἰτεῖν διάδημα τὸν Τιβέριον· καὶ τούτου σημεῖον εἶναι τὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἐπιθιγγάνειν. πάντες μὲν οὖν ἐθορυβήθησαν· ὁ δὲ Νασικᾶς ἡξίου τὸν ὕπατον τῇ πόλει βοηθεῖν καὶ καταλύειν τὸν τύραννον.

English Translation¹⁴:

Whereupon Tiberius put his hand to his head, making this visible sign that his life was in danger, since the questioners could not hear his voice. But his opponents, on seeing this, ran to the senate and told that body that Tiberius was asking for a crown; and that his putting his hand to his head was a sign having that meaning. All the senators, of course, were greatly disturbed, and Nasica demanded that the consul should come to the rescue of the state and put down the tyrant.

Annotation:

Nasica justified the use of violence by manipulating the situation to make it look as though Tiberius was trying to become king. Plutarch¹⁵ observed that this would create a political *casus belli* and would justify "put(ting) down the tyrant"¹⁶. That Nasica was successful in gaining support from the Senate proved that an appeal to the Senate's/people's pathos¹⁷ was an effective means to justify violence in politics. This implied that as long as you claimed to have a justifiable reason to use violence, it would be accepted in the now political sphere. Unpunishable violence could form the platform for *magister populi*, cementing the value of military might in the Roman political process.

¹⁴ Bill Thayer. "Plutarch, The Life of Tiberius Gracchus." 167.

¹⁵ A Roman citizen who wrote in Greek, a "middle Platonist", born in 46AD.

¹⁶ Plutarch, "Life of Tiberius Gracchus".

¹⁷ Comes from the Greek "πάθος" is a rhetorical term, referring to the appealing of emotions.

V.) The Senate Cover Up

Plutarch, “Parallel Lives; The Life of Tiberius Gracchus” Volume XX:

ἐδόκει δὲ καὶ τότε μὴ χαλεπῶς ἂν ἐνδοῦναι παρηγορηθεὶς ὁ Τιβέριος, ἔτι δὲ ῥᾶον εἶξαι δίχα φόνου καὶ τραυμάτων ἐπιοῦσιν· οὐ γὰρ πλείονες ἢ τρισχίλιοι περὶ αὐτὸν ἦσαν. ἀλλ' ἔοικεν ὀργῇ τῶν πλουσίων καὶ μίσει πλέον ἢ δι' ἧς ἐσκήπτοντο προφάσεις ἢ σύστασις ἐπ' αὐτὸν γενέσθαι· καὶ τούτου μέγα τεκμήριον ὡμῶς καὶ παρανόμως ὑβρισθεὶς ὁ νεκρός, οὐ γὰρ ἐπέτρεψαν ἀνελέσθαι τὸ σῶμα τῷ ἀδελφῷ δεομένῳ καὶ θάψαι νυκτός, ἀλλὰ μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων νεκρῶν εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν ἔρριψαν. καὶ τοῦτο πέρας οὐκ ἦν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ τοὺς μὲν ἐξεκήρυττον ἀκρίτους, τοὺς δὲ συλλαμβάνοντες ἀπεκτίννυσαν· ἐν οἷς καὶ Διοφάνης ὁ ῥήτωρ ἀπώλετο.

English Translation¹⁸:

For his adherents numbered not more than three thousand. But the combination against him would seem to have arisen from the hatred and anger of the rich rather than from the pretexts which they alleged; and there is strong proof of this in their lawless and savage treatment of his dead body. For they would not listen to his brother's request that he might take up the body and bury it by night, but threw it into the river along with the other dead.

Annotation:

Plutarch describes how the senate “lawlessly and savagely”¹⁹ cut up Tiberius’s body and tossed into the Tiber River²⁰. By treating his corpse like that of a tyrant²¹, they branded him and his followers anti-republican. His followers were massacred and the aristocratic class justified the violence by calling them “enemies of the republic”²². Any political backlash that arose due to the actions of the aristocrats was silenced swiftly by death. The aristocrats thus suffered very little backlash, and because of this many other future rulers would realize that justified violence was an effective way to deal with political opposition.

¹⁸ Bill Thayer. “Plutarch The Life of Tiberius Gracchus” 193.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Goldsworthy, Adrian. *Caesar: Life of a Colossus*. 26.

²² Plutarch The Life of Tiberius Gracchus 193.

VI.) of Tiberius's Death

Appian, "The Roman History" Book 1:

καὶ τοῦτο μόνον ἂν τις εὖροι τῶν πάλαι στάσεων ἔργον ἔνοπλον, καὶ τοῦθ' ὑπ' αὐτομόλου γενόμενον, ξίφος δὲ οὐδέν πω παρενεχθὲν ἐς ἐκκλησίαν οὐδὲ φόνον ἔμφυλον, πρὶν γε Τιβέριος Γράκχος δημαρχῶν καὶνόμους ἐσφέρων πρῶτος ὅδε ἐν στάσει ἀπώλετο καὶ ἐπ' αὐτῷ πολλοὶ κατὰ τὸ Καπιτώλιον εἰλούμενοι περὶ τὸν νεῶν ἀνηρέθησαν.

English Translation²³:

This is the only case of armed strife that can be found in the ancient seditions, and this was caused by an exile. The sword was never carried into the assembly, and there was no civil butchery until Tiberius Gracchus, while serving as tribune and bringing forward new laws, was the first to fall a victim to internal commotion; and many others besides, who were assembled with him at the Capitol, were slain around the temple.

Annotation:

Appian²⁴ describes how before Tiberius Gracchus, violence was not part of the Roman Republic's political process. Specifically, Appian wrote "The sword was never carried into the assembly"²⁵ until the death of Tiberius Gracchus²⁶. For the first time in the history of the republic, violence was directly used to solve a political problem. The precedent of killing political enemies would lead to a paradigm shift in Roman politics where "political influence was now directly related to force"²⁷. This paradigm shift didn't go unnoticed and the next decade of politics would be dominated by militant tyrants, who would achieve power through killing and intimidation instead of superior policies or reforms.

²³ Horace White. Appian, *The Civil Wars* Horace White, Ed." 1.1.

²⁴ A Greek historian with Roman citizenship, born in 95AD.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Plutarch*. "The Life of Sulla." 325.

VIII.) Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix

Plutarch, "Parallel Lives; The Life of Sulla" Volume IV:

Λουκρητίου δὲ Ὀφέλλα τοῦ Μάριον ἐκπολιορκήσαντος αἰτουμένου καὶ μετιόντος ὑπατεῖαν πρῶτον μὲν ἐκώλυεν· ὥς δὲ ἐκεῖνος ὑπὸ πολλῶν σπουδαζόμενος εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν ἐνέβαλε, πέμψας τινὰ τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν ἑκατονταρχῶν ἀπέσφαξε τὸν ἄνδρα, καθεζόμενος αὐτὸς ἐπὶ βήματος ἐν τῷ Διοσκουρείῳ καὶ τὸν φόνον ἐφορῶν ἄνωθεν. τῶν δὲ ἀνθρώπων τὸν ἑκατοντάρχην συλλαβόντων καὶ προσαγαγόντων τῷ βήματι, σιωπῆσαι κελεύσας τοὺς θορυβοῦντας αὐτὸς ἔφη κελεῦσαι τοῦτο, καὶ τὸν ἑκατοντάρχην ἀφεῖναι προσέταξεν.

Ὁ μέντοι θρίαμβος αὐτοῦ τῇ πολυτελείᾳ καὶ καινότητι τῶν βασιλικῶν λαφύρων σοβαρὸς γενόμενος μείζονα κόσμον ἔσχε καὶ καλὸν θέαμα τοὺς φυγάδας.

English Translation²⁸:

But that which Lucius Catiline did was thought to be most monstrous of all. This man, namely, had killed his brother before the civil struggle was decided, and now asked Sulla to proscribe the man, as one still living; and he was proscribed. Then Catiline, returning this favor of Sulla's, killed a certain Marcus Marius, one of the opposite faction, and brought his head to Sulla as he was sitting in the forum, and then going to the lustral water of Apollo which was near, washed the blood off his hands.

But besides his massacres, the rest of Sulla's proceedings also gave offence. For he proclaimed himself dictator.

Annotation:

Sulla was the first *dictator perpetuus*²⁹, taking supreme power in 81BC. Plutarch³⁰ explains that he did so by using proscriptions to kill his rivals of "opposite factions"³¹ and to massacre anyone who spoke out against him. Much like Octavius, he justified murder by calling his rivals "enemies of the state"³². By eliminating his enemies in a similar fashion as Octavius did with Tiberius, Sulla became the *magister populi* and achieved the pinnacle of political power without the use of reforms or popular support. Sulla proved what Tiberius had failed to realize, namely that military power was almost more important than any reform or plebeian support.

²⁸ Bill Thayer. "Plutarch, The Life of Sulla." 325.

²⁹ Latin for "dictator in perpetuity".

³⁰ A Greek-Roman historian who was a Roman citizen but wrote in Greek, born in 46AD.

³¹ "Plutarch, The Life of Sulla." 325.

³² Frank N. Magill, "The Ancient World: Dictionary of World Biography" Routledge, 1209.

IX.) The Roman Empire for Sale

Herodian, “History of the Roman Empire” 2.6.4:

Όταν οι πραιτωριανοί είδαν ότι οι άνθρωποι ήταν ήσυχοι και ότι κανείς δεν τόλμησε να εκδικηθεί το φόνο του αυτοκράτορα, παρέμειναν απομονωμένοι μέσα στο στρατόπεδο. Στη συνέχεια, φέρνοντας μπροστά στα τείχη τους άντρες με τις πιο δυνατές φωνές, έκαναν διακήρυξη ότι η αυτοκρατορία ήταν προς πώληση, με την υπόσχεση να παραδώσει σε αυτόν που προσφέρει την υψηλότερη τιμή, και πολλά υποσχόμενη για τη διεξαγωγή του αγοραστή με ασφάλεια να το αυτοκρατορικό παλάτι υπό την προστασία του τα χέρια τους.

English Translation³³:

When the praetorians saw that the people were quiet and that no one dared to avenge the murder of the emperor, they remained isolated inside the camp. Then, bringing forward to the walls the men with the loudest voices, they made proclamation that the empire was for sale, promising to hand it over to the man who offered the highest price, and promising to conduct the purchaser safely to the imperial palace under the protection of their arms.

Annotation:

Emperor Pertanix is described by Dio Cassius as a “justice loving and upright man”³⁴. Elected in 193AD, Pertanix was a Gracchian style reformer who attempted to discipline the now corrupt Praetorian guard. The guards were eager not to give up their political power and killed Pertanix, proclaiming that “the empire was for sale”³⁵. Herodian³⁶ described the ultimate corruption of the Roman system and how even the highest political positions could be achieved through money and violence. This decline was foreshadowed by the death of Tiberius Gracchus and the end of the custom that a political position should be occupied by someone who acted appropriately³⁷. At this point in the Roman Empire (300 years after the death of Tiberius Gracchus), policies and politics were almost irrelevant and the paramount thing in the political process was military might.

³³ Edward C. Echols “Herodian, History of the Rome Empire.” 2.6.4.

³⁴ Cassius Dio, 74:1

³⁵ Edward C. Echols “Herodian, History of the Rome Empire.” 2.6.4.

³⁶ A Roman Civil Servant, who wrote in Greek, born in 170AD.

³⁷ Machiavelli – *The Prince*, Ch. XIX. (Talks about the need for kings to be perceived like acting as kings)

X.) Conclusion:

The murder of Tiberius Gracchus was a catalyst for the use of violence³⁸ in the Roman politics. By appealing to the pathos of the people of Roman and describing your rivals as “enemies of the state”, Octavius showed that anyone could justify the use of violence to eliminate opposition. This undermined the legitimacy on which the Roman Republic had been founded and led directly to dictators such as Sulla, who used extreme violence to gain political power. Later politicians such as Emperor Pertanix who attempted to reform a corrupt system suffered a fate similar to Tiberius Gracchus, demonstrating that military might was more important than popular support in securing and maintaining political power. The reverberations of this can be seen today, with leaders such as Putin justifying the use of violence in Crimea and using the threat violence to cement their hold on power.

³⁸ Scullard, Howard Hayes. *From the Gracchi to Nero: a History of Rome from 133 B.C. to A.D. 68*, 28.

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