

From the Death of the Gracchi Brothers to the Downfall of the Republic

Ximan Yuan*

*Westminster School, 995 Hopmeadow St. Simsbury, Connecticut 06070, United States
gyuan0520@gmail.com*

**Corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper aims to trace the legacy of the Gracchi brothers and the effect of their reform throughout the republican era, specifically over how it foreshadows the collapse of the Republic. Although the reform implemented by the Gracchus brothers failed, it is still of great historical importance because it reveals the corrupted nature of Roman republic while taking the socioeconomic background into consideration to predict the downfall Rome. The downfall of the Gracchi brothers was primarily resulted from the majority of the senators whose interests were against the reform measures because the benefits for the majority were built on the lost of the senators. As a result, the Senate refused to accept changes of any sort and rejected an opening advancement proposed to improve the welfare of the People, leading to the tragedy of the death of Gracchi brothers.

Keywords: the downfall of Roman Republic, the Gracchi brothers, reform measures in Rome

1. Introduction

Before introducing the reform of the Gracchus brother, it is necessary to first understand the underlying problems within the society.

1.1. Issues Resulted from the Government in the Early Republic

As the territorial size and power of Rome grew because of its bellicose nature and desire to conquer foreign countries, the old institution, which was known as the Seven Early Kings of Rome, was overthrown and replaced by “res publica,” the representative democracy in the form of a republic. The new government founded during the early republic (509BC-280BC) was intended to resolve the long-lasting conflicts between two social orders: nobility and plebeians. Nobility were members of the privileged class who enjoyed a monopoly of power in contrast with the plebeians who only possessed voting rights in the popular assembly. Such division of two classes implies the corrupt power of nobles that may present in the society, which was exacerbated by the structure of the government. To be specific, the government of the Roman republic was divided into three parts: the Senate, the assembly, and the magistrate. Senators, who worked as a council and were appointed by the council, proposed advice to the king. The popular assemblies, composed of male citizens, possessed the right to enact legislation. Magistrates, the elected officials, had the power to veto the decree of the state. Under such a hierarchal government, the struggle between different classes was inevitable because the rights were possessed mainly by the nobility and the privileged class.

1.2. Issues Resulted from the Territorial Expansion in the Middle Republic

After Rome finished the transformation from the primitive monarch to a “republic,” it embarked on its territorial expansion which led to the economic and social changes in Italy. In the 1st century BC, it is widely believed in Rome that their ancestors were a group of peasants uncorrupted by wealth. Such belief serves as the basis of its agricultural-based economy which was primarily driven by human labor. After the new form of government was established, Rome embarked on frequent warfare in the Mediterranean for territorial expansion [1]. The majority of the adult males were conscripted, and many of them sacrificed due to the large number of casualties. Under such circumstances, inhabitants from defeated countries were imported to Italy to sustain the agricultural-based economy of Rome. More importantly, the introduction of slaves altered the traditional landownership of Rome. The lands of Italy became concentrated in a small group of elite for two reasons: on the one hand, farmers who worked for the landowners were vulnerable to temporary poor harvests that may cause them to accumulate debt and lose their land; on the other hand, mass mobilization of adult males forced them to serve in the war for many years instead of toiling on their land, leaving the land vacant and eventually replaced by slaves held by the wealthy landowners because slaves can be easily transported or sold for economic purpose as Cato argued in his work *De Agricola*. He believed that the master should possess the habit of selling [2]. In such a way, it is obvious that owning slaves as a form of labor is more profitable than hiring farmers since slaves are free, and the landowners can simply sell their slaves if they no longer need them. When the land was concentrated in the few, military shortage also became a problem because people could not meet the property qualification to join an army. As a result, the class division, in addition to being intensified by the structure of the government, was exacerbated by the unequal distribution of wealth which is concentrated in the landholders.

1.3. Issues during the Late Republic

As Rome enters the period of the late republic (133-31BC), issues also raised from provincial administration as Rome acquired more and more territory. The deficiencies in provincial administration resulted in the discontent of the soldiers and plebians. As Rome expanded its territory, many governors were appointed to regions far away from Italy. People believed that these governors possessed supreme power and often abused it which could not be asserted by the Senate due to their distance from Rome. An instance of this overuse of power was that soldiers were often exploited by the governors to fulfill their desire to win battles, namely, more land. Along with intensified poverty and discontent, many riots occur.

2. Discussion

Tiberius Gracchus is the elder amongst the two Gracchus brothers who was the first to implement a reform. Before embarking on the discussion of Tiberius’s reform, it is necessary to understand his career and the power he possessed. Tiberius Gracchus was elected as the plebian tribune in 133 BCE. Namely, these tribunes were representatives of the plebians, the commoners, who could barely compete with nobles and landholders who composes the majority of the Senate. As a plebian tribune, Tiberius Gracchus possessed the responsibility of protecting the rights of the commoners by intervening the legal matters on behalf of the commoners. Tribunes can “veto” the proposals of other tribunes, thus preventing the law from being implemented.

With the issues of the Roman Republic having been mentioned, one could easily understand the incentives of Tiberius as he desired to resolve the issue of military recruitment and help the plebians who could not compete with the powerful landowners. During the Italian War, some lands were gained by the Roman Republic. Although they were called the “ager publicus,” the public land, they

were usually seized by the nobles. Such circumstances led to three serious problems. Firstly, the city was overcrowded by the poor because they could not claim their lands from the wealthy. Secondly, lands seized by the nobles were mainly used to cultivate cash crops which could provide huge profits for the landowners but could not supply the daily need of food for the plebians. The third point, which is perhaps one of the most important issues that arouse Tiberius to implement the land reform, was the declining morale of the Roman society. As Boren claimed, “immediate crisis was less agrarian than urban, less concerned with land than with people” [3]. In other words, Boren argues that as the disparity between the wealthy and the poor was exacerbated, poor people became less concerned about land issues and more despaired of changing the status quo, thus leading to the decline of participation in military service through which they could gain more land. In addition to Bore, Plutarch noted such circumstances in his work as well:

“The poor, who had been ejected from their land, no longer showed themselves eager for military service, and neglected the bringing up of children, so that soon all Italy was conscious of a death of freemen, and was filled with gangs of foreign slaves, by whose aid the rich cultivated their estates, from which they had driven away the free citizens” [4]

Plutarch agreed with Boren that the military participant rate was one of the most serious consequences of unequal land distribution. If Rome remained in their contemporary status quo, the rapacity of the landowners who “employed” slaves to work for their profits would lead to the destruction of the cities and the demise of the citizens.

Tiberius’ goal was not only to formally enforce a land law dealing with excess land that was , frequently ignored in the past to protect the interests of the plebians, but also to reduce the shortage of recruit as per mentioned by historians: “it is generally to be agreed that the reform program of Tiberius Gracchus was designed to remedy a major crisis, a shortage of recruits for the legion” [5]. To come to that end, Tiberius specifically appealed to the land law. As Plutarch mentioned in his book, “forbid by each individual of more than 500 iugera, about 300 acres of *ager publicus*” [4]. Although this law initially appeared as a check to the rapacity of the wealthy, the neighboring rich men finally “transferred rentals to themselves” and “held most of the land openly in their names” [4]. The inactivity of the government in the Roman Republic was manifested through the words of Plutarch: since the Senate was mainly composed of the landowners who enjoyed their affluence, they do not wish to pass the law because it would harm their interests. Here, one could find that even before the dictatorship of Caesar, Rome was already haunted by the corruption within the government, which foreshadowed its downfall.

Unsurprisingly, Tiberius faced different challenges during the process because he directly acted against the interests of the Senate: as Tiberius proposed his enactment, he appealed directly to the Plebian Tribal Assembly instead of the whole Senate as the tradition dictated. Meanwhile, Tiberius delivered a speech depicting the hardship of the plebians to win the sympathy of the multitudes. In the speech, he referred that the nobility in the society had their place to “repose and refuge,” while the plebians “had no settlements of their own” [6]. Although Tiberius attempted to win the favor by depicting the predicament of the plebians, Marcus Octavius, another tribune, was appointed by the Senate to veto the land law. In response to the Senate, Tiberius introduced a law depriving Octavius of his tribuneship [7]. Ultimately, thanks to the Plebian Tribal Assembly who claimed the nullity of Octavius’s veto and that he was no longer holding the office, the agrarian law was passed. At the same time, three men were chosen to oversee the distribution of the lands: Tiberius himself, Appius Claudius, his father-in-law, and Caius Gracchus, his brother. From the revolution of Tiberius Gracchus, two conclusions can be drawn. On one side, as Plutarch mentioned in his work:

“And again, nothing is so sacred and inviolate as objects consecrated to the gods; and yet no one has hindered the people from using such objects, or moving them, or changing their position in such manner as may be desired. It is therefore permissible for the people to transfer the tribunate also, as

a consecrated thing, from one man to another. And that the office is not inviolable or irremovable is plain from the fact that many times men holding it resign it under oath of disability, and of their own accord beg to be relieved of it" [8].

In other words, Plutarch means that one could see that the tradition, as represented by the tribuneship of Octavius, was not "inviolable" as it seemed to be and could be removed easily. The Senate tasked Octavius to veto Tiberius because his action and accusation against Octavius were examples against the tradition. Consequently, the incident of Tiberius symbolized one of the most important turning points of Roman history for it is the first time when the senatorial decision was intervened by a plebian tribune, namely, a mob. This progression already implied the overthrow of senatorial rule as Rome would be entirely controlled by the dictator Caesar in the future. Moreover, while Tiberius' success in defending the plebians from the greed of nobility was groundbreaking, Tiberius was revolutionary because he facilitated the advancement of Rome by ameliorating the disparity of wealth, an issue that was also the root of many other social problems. Tiberius's land bill also solved the issue of shortage in the troop. Clearly, he was working for the prosperity of the republic instead of personal interest.

In 132 BC, Tiberius Gracchus attempted to reelect the Tribune to continue his work with the land law. However, to many other Senators, the re-election of Tiberius Gracchus implied his desire to become a tyranny, especially when they recalled how Tiberius accused the deposition of Marcus Octavius. As the Senate misinterpreted the gesture of Tiberius as the intention for ruling the whole republic, *Pontifex Maximus* Cornelius Scipio Nasica initiated the murder of Tiberius to "protect the country". In the account of Appian, Nasica "wound the border of his toga about his head" [9]. As Plutarch wrote, "This is said to have been the first sedition at Rome, since the abolition of royal power, to end in bloodshed and the death of citizens" [10]. The death of Tiberius not only marked the first time when violence was used for political purpose, but also indicated the loss of the morality and the dominance of nobility of the Roman Republic because a tribune who fought for the commoners were killed unjustly. In general, such precedent as well as the long-lasting corrupted nature of the Roman Senate predestined the downfall of the republic because it reflected upon the greed of other generals who wish to seize the power through violence, ultimately reducing the republic to a dictatorship.

After the death his brother, Gaius Gracchus was elected tribune in 123 BC. As a great orator, Gaius Gracchus continued the reform of his brother even more aggressively. Within the government, as Plutarch depicted, "he introduced two laws, one providing that if the people had deprived any magistrate of his office, such magistrate should not be allowed to hold office a second time; and another providing that if any magistrate had banished a citizen without trial, such magistrate should be liable to public prosecution" [11]. Under these two laws, magistrates and tribunes were asked to take responsibility for their proposal and won favor from the people. It can thus be concluded that Gaius did not confine his attention simply to relieving the poor citizens as his brothers did because he believed that to rescue Rome from the root of the trouble, it was vital to weaken the power of the Senate whose avaricious policy had led to these troubles. In addition to the reform in the government, Gaius supplemented the land bill of his brother by establishing colonies in Italy and lowering the market price of grain. Therefore, whereas previous Roman colonies were mainly conquered for military purposes, new colonies established in Southern Italy was established for the cultivation of food crops and cash crops when the society suffered from food shortages [12]. More importantly, Gaius implemented the *lex frumentaria*, successfully relieving the pressure of the plebians as they were able to purchase grain at a relatively lower market price from the government. Another popular reform dealt with the appointment of judges, which curtailed the power of most senators and reduced the disparity between nobility and plebians "for they alone could serve as judges in criminal cases, and this privilege made them formidable both to the common people and to the equestrian order" [13]. Gaius also appealed directly to equestrian orders because they could achieve a position in the Senate.

Having listed the measures of Gaius Gracchus, it is necessary to analyze the effect of them on Roman society and some oppositions he encountered. Firstly, his advanced land bill successfully improved the sustenance of the farmers because it provided a stable grain price, preventing the loss resulted from poor harvests and weather condition. Secondly, the law concerning the equestrian orders protected provincials from the Senators and provided Equites with opportunities of gaining wealth instead of submitting to the order of the governors. However, although the plebeians benefited from the reform of Gaius Gracchus, the relationship between the Senate and the multitude was exacerbated as senators were forced to abandon parts of their power, thus obtaining less amount of money. Therefore, similar to the affair of his brother, Gaius also received the opposition from the Senate when they noticed the increasing popularity of Gaius, indicating the damping benefits of the senators. Therefore, in response to Gaius, Livius Drusus, a fellow tribune of Gaius, proposed other legislations to the multitude under the auspices of the Senate. These legislations were neither reliable nor beneficial to the People but were merely adopted to undermine the power of Gaius. For example, when Gaius proposed that all Latins should be granted equal voting rights, the Senate dismissed such propositions and instead approved the measure of Drusus that no Latin would ever be beaten with rods. Also, when Gaius tried to establish two colonies with reliable citizens, the Senate accused him of trying to manipulate the People before Drusus proposed twelve colonies with three thousand citizens. Drusus' constant references to the Senate made some of the multitude feel less hostility toward the Senate and less impressed by Gaius' plans.

Gaius' eventual downfall came when the legislation was passed to establish a colony at Carthage and Gaius was appointed to oversee the construction and left for Africa. While Gaius was absent, Drusus immediately attacked Gaius' ally Fulvius Flaccus, who was suspected of stirring up the Italian allies to revolt against the Senate. Meanwhile, Lucius Opimius, a conservative and part of the oligarchy, was elected as consul and wished to restore the traditional power of the Senate. Thus, Livius Drusus and Lucius Opimius worked together to repeal as many of Gaius' measures as possible. By 121 BCE, Gaius Gracchus gradually lost his support. After a rebellion broke out in Capitoline Hill, *Senatus consultum ultimum*, meaning the ultimate decree of the Senate, was passed for the first time which gave the Senate the power to declare anyone an enemy of the state and execute him without trial. A mob was then assigned to assassinate Gaius. Ultimately, expecting his eminent death, Gaius Gracchus committed suicide on the Aventine Hill in 121 BCE.

After analyzing the oppositions that the Gracchi brothers encountered during their revolution and their downfalls, the parallels between the two are obvious. Firstly, both attempted to solve the political conundrum resulted from the Senate in which the nobility utterly ignored the welfare of the People. Secondly, both received the opposition from other tribunes who were supported by the Senate to undermine the proposals of the Gracchi. As a result, the corruption of the interest group within the Senate appeared as the determining factor to end both of their reforms, and such condition lasted until the dictatorship of Caesar. That is to say, the era of the Gracchi foreshadowed the downfall of Rome because the nature of the government had never been changed since then.

The Gracchi brothers were famous for their courage to challenge the status quo of Rome. As Appian argued in the *civil war*, "What Gracchus had in his mind in proposing the measure was not money, but men. Inspired greatly by the usefulness of the work and believing that nothing more advantageous or admirable could ever happen to Italy, he took no account of the difficulties surrounding it" [14]. In other words, the Gracchi brothers took side with the plebeians despite potential difficulties. Their selfless efforts established a sharp contrast between their probity and the greed of the Senators, rendering the two memorable to Roman people. The Gracchan land redistributions and conversion of private property did temporarily improve the prosperity of the peasantry, though, during the next decade. Nevertheless, after the death of the Gracchi, their reform measures were largely abolished by the Senate as they contradicted with the interest of the nobility in the Senate. The

provisions giving power to non-senators could not be replaced for political purposes, and they appeared as the chief effect of the tribunes of two brothers. Although the legislative branch seemed to work better after the death of the two with several other standing criminal courts having been instituted, such reform remained in force for only a short period of time. As a result, the reform of the Gracchi brothers was a failure overall given their short-lived nature and that they did not have a substantial impact on Roman society. However, the Gracchi brothers showed the rise of popular party in Rome. The political parties were divided into the *optimates* and *populares*.

The legacy of the Gracchi brothers appeared as one of the most significant social turmoil because it foreshadowed the disintegration of Roman political government and marked the decline of the traditional Roman society. The violent deaths of the two also reflected on other political riots and executions that would come in the next century until the collapse of the Roman Republic, and it was such return of political upheaval within the society that would pose the greatest threat to the following generations. Starting from their reform, the power of the Senate and People were torn apart and rebuilt constantly, leading eventually to the downfall of Rome. As evidenced by the opposition the Gracchi faced during their reform, avaricious politicians already displayed signs of obtaining power, not to mention the various approaches they possessed to exploit the government teetering on collapsing. Consequently, the extreme polarity between the nobility, the senators, and the commoners began to develop. Eventually, such polarity would lead to the rise of the dictator era and the fall of the republic. Violence, riots, and mob tactics became the mainstream of Roman society throughout the era as politicians sought to achieve their goal through violent means. The Senate itself, once cooperating against the Tribunes of the Plebes, began to split apart based on different interest group after the death of the Gracchi. Such circumstance within the society set the stage for the era of Marius, Sulla, Pompey, and the dictator Julius Caesar as the Gracchi brothers provided the first sparks of the fire.

3. Conclusion

Although the reform of the Gracchi brothers was a failure because it was abolished by the Senate after their deaths, their extraordinary actions in the service of the multitude of Rome set the stage for the conflict that would continue haunt the society and challenge the structure of the Republic. More importantly, their legacy and contribution to the society resonate far beyond the bond of the Republic as they continued to influence leaders and commoners of Rome for years to come.

References

- [1] D. W. Baronowski, (1995). *Polybius on the causes of the Third Punic War*. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/367442>
- [2] Cato, M. (1934) 2. (Eds.), *on Agriculture*. Loeb Classical Library.
- [3] Boren, HC. (1958) *The Urban Side of the Gracchan Economic Crisis*. *The American Historical Review* 63, No. 4: 890-902.
- [4] Plutarch. (1921) 8. (Eds.), *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 161-163.
- [5] Morgan, M.G., Walsh, J.A. (1978) *Ti. Gracchus (TR. PL. 133 B.C.), The Numantine Affair, and the Deposition of M. Octavius*. *Classical Philology* Vol 73, No. 3: 200-210
- [6] J. S. RICHARDSON. (1980) *Ownership of Roman land: Tiberius Gracchus and the Italians*. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol 70: 1-11
- [7] Plutarch. (1921) 12. (Eds.), *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 173-175.
- [8] Plutarch. (1921) 15. (Eds.), *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 183-185.
- [9] Appian. (1913) 16. (Eds.), *The Civil Wars*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 33-35.
- [10] Plutarch. (1921) 20. (Eds.), *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 191-193.
- [11] Plutarch. (1921) 4. (Eds.), *The Life of Tiberius Gracchus*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 151-153.
- [12] Scullard, H.H.. (1959), *THE GRACCHI*. (Eds.), *From the Gracchi to Nero: A History of Rome 133 BC to AD 68*. Routledge, Oxon. pp. 52-68.
- [13] Plutarch. (1921) 5. (Eds.), *The Life of Caius Gracchus*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 209-211.

[14] Appian. (1913) 11. (Eds.), *The Civil Wars*. Loeb Classical Library. pp. 23-25.