

The Gracchi as (im)perfect Romans – Velleius Paterculus on the crisis of the late Roman Republic

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(1) Vell. 2,2

Inmanem deditio Mancini civitatis movit dissensionem. Quippe Ti. Gracchus, Ti. Gracchi clarissimi atque eminentissimi viri filius, P. Africani ex filia nepos, quo quaestore et auctore id foedus ictum erat, nunc graviter ferens aliquid a se pactum infirmari, nunc similis vel iudicii vel poenae metuens discrimen, tribunus plebis creatus, vir alioqui vita innocentissimus, ingenio florentissimus, [2] 5 proposito sanctissimus, tantis denique adornatus virtutibus quantas perfecta et natura et industria mortalis condicio recipit, P. Mucio Scaevola L. Calpurnio consulibus abhinc annos CLXII descivit a bonis, pollicitusque toti Italiae civitatem, [3] simul etiam promulgatis agrariis legibus, omnibus statum concupiscentibus, summa imis miscuit et in praeruptum atque anceps periculum adduxit rem publicam.

The surrender of Mancinus gave rise to dissention on a frightful scale within the state. Tiberius Gracchus, son of the famous and eminent Tiberius Gracchus and grandson of Publius Africanus (being born of Africanus' daughter), had been quaestor and had been responsible for the signing of the treaty. He then wavered between outrage over the annulment of something he had negotiated and fear of exposing himself to a similar judgment or penalty. He was a man with an otherwise irreproachable record, who had an outstanding intellect and perfectly honorable goals – [2] in short, a man endowed with the greatest virtues that the human condition can acquire when it is perfected both by nature and hard work. When he became plebeian tribune, however, in the consulship of Publius Mucius Scaevola and Lucius Calpurnius, that is, 162 years ago, he abandoned the cause of the right minded. He promised citizenship to the whole of Italy [3] and at the same time promulgated agrarian legislation at a point when everybody hungered for stability. He thus precipitated general upheaval and brought the Republic into imminent and serious danger.

(2) Vell. 2,4,4

Hic [sc. Scipio Aemilianus], eum interrogante tribune Carbone quid de Ti. Gracchi caede sentiret, respondit, si is occupandae rei publicae animum habuisset, iure caesum. Et cum omnis contio acclamasset, 'hostium' inquit 'armatorum totiens clamore non territus, qui possum vestro moveri, quorum noverca est Italia?'

When the tribune Carbo asked him [sc. Scipio Aemilianus] for his thoughts on the murder of Ti. Gracchus, Scipio replied that the killing was justified if Gracchus' aim had been to seize control of the state. And when the entire assembly remonstrated, he said 'I was not frightened at so often hearing the shouts of the enemy in arms, so how can I be concerned by your shouts, when you have Italy only as a stepmother?'

(3) Vell. 2,3

Tum P. Scipio Nasica, eius qui optimus vir a senatu iudicatus erat nepos, eius qui censor porticus in Capitolio fecerat filius, pronepos autem Cn. Scipionis, celeberrimi viri P. Africani patrum, is privatusque et togatus, cum esset consobrinus Ti. Gracchi, patriam cognationi praeferens et quicquid publice salutare non esset, privatim alienum existimans (ob eas virtutes primus omnium absens pontifex maximus factus est), circumdata laevo brachio togae lacinia ex superiore parte Capitolii summis gradibus insistens hortatus est, qui salvam vellent rem publicam, se sequerentur. [2] Tum optimates, senatus, atque equestris ordinis pars melior et maior, et intacta perniciosi consilii plebs intruere in Gracchum stantem in area cum catervis suis et concientem paene totius Italiae frequentiam. Is fugiens decurrensque clivo Capitolino, fragmine subsellii ictus vitam, quam gloriosissime degere potuerat, immatura morte finivit. [3] Hoc initium in urbe Roma civilis sanguinis gladiatorumque impunitatis fuit. Inde ius vi obrutum potentiorque habitus prior, discordiaeque civium antea condicionibus sanan solitae ferro diiudicatae bellaque non causis inita, sed prout eorum merces fuit. Quod haut mirum est: non enim ibi consistunt exempla, unde coeperunt, sed quamlibet in tenuem recepta tramitem latissime evagandi sibi viam faciunt, et ubi semel recto deerratum est, in praeceps pervenitur, nec quisquam sibi putat turpe, quod alii fuit fructuosum.

It was at this point that Publius Scipio Nasica wrapped the hem of his toga around his left arm and, standing on the top steps in the upper part of the Capitol, urged all who wanted the state to be saved to follow him. Nasica was grandson of the Scipio who had been deemed by the senate to be the best man in Rome; he was the son of the Scipio who, as censor, had seen to the construction of the porticoes on the Capitol; and he was the great-grandson of the Gnaeus Scipio, the famous uncle of Publius Africanus. He was at the time just a private citizen and wearing the toga, and although he was a cousin of Tiberius Gracchus, he set his country above family ties and thought that what was not for the good of the state was not in his personal interest, either (for which qualities he was the first man ever to be elected pontifex maximus in his absence). [2] Then the nobility, the senate, the majority (and the best) of the equestrian order, and those of the plebs not infected with these pernicious ideas charged at Gracchus as he stood in an open area with large numbers of his supporters trying to incite a crowd that was drawn from almost all of Italy. When Gracchus fled and was running down the road from the Capitol, he was struck by a broken piece of a bench, and he ended with a premature death a life in which he could have enjoyed the greatest distinction. [3] This marked the beginning of civil bloodletting, and assassination without fear of punishment, in the city of Rome. From now on right was overwhelmed by might, and power took precedence. Differences between citizens, which had usually been remedied by compromise in earlier days, were now settled by the sword, and wars were started not for cause but on the basis of their profitability. Nor is this surprising. [4] Precedents once set do not end where they began. No matter how narrow the path on which they embark, they open up a way of deviating from it with the greatest latitude, and once one has wandered off the right path, it is a headlong drop that lies ahead. And nobody thinks that what another has found profitable is discreditable for himself.