

Rise of the Welfare/Warfare State

The death throes of the once-great Roman Republic began when its leadership embarked on militarism and exploited class envy to consolidate power.

by *Steve Bonta*

This is the fourth installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.

The man sped down the Capitoline Hill from the Roman Senate, fleeing from a bloodthirsty mob. At a wooden bridge several of his companions urged him to run on, while they defended the narrow way. He raced through the streets of Rome, calling loudly for help. Throngs of onlookers cheered encouragingly as he passed, but no one offered to help. He pleaded with curious bystanders to lend him a horse to escape his pursuers, but to no avail.

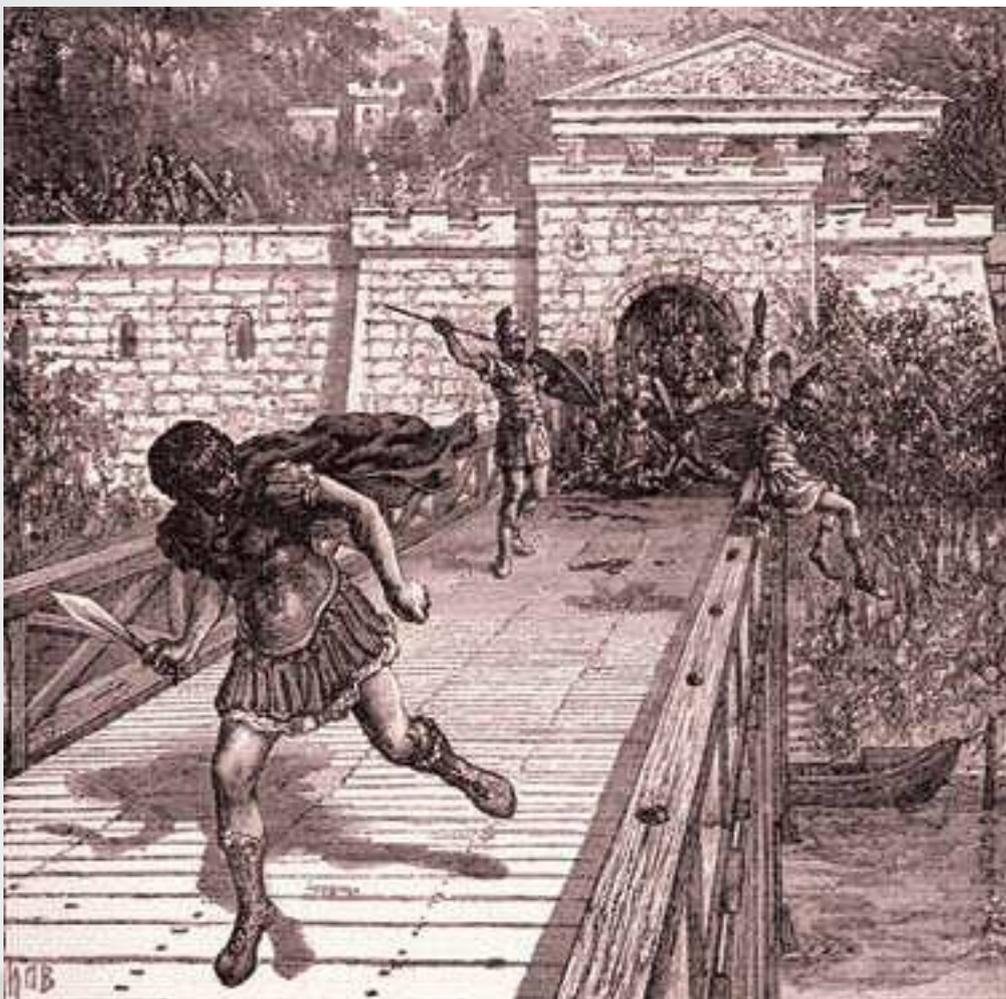
As the relentless pursuit drew close, the man, together with his most trusted servant, slipped into a sacred grove consecrated to the Furies. Realizing that escape was impossible, he ordered his servant to cut his throat to spare him the indignity of execution by the mob. The rabid partisans soon found his lifeless body, with that of the faithful servant, who had turned his dagger on himself after carrying out his master's last wish. Triumphant, they severed the dead man's head and carried it off to claim a reward in gold. The man's headless body, along with those of thousands of his followers who had been killed in the unrest, was dumped in the Tiber River. The unfortunate victim of the mob's wrath was Caius Gracchus, and the year was 121 B.C., just 25 years after the destruction of Carthage.

The spasm of civil violence was not Rome's first. Just 11 years earlier, Caius' older brother Tiberius Gracchus and many of his supporters had suffered a similar fate in what was acknowledged to be

the first civil violence in Rome. In both instances, the controversy had arisen over a centuries-old injustice: the unequal recognition of property rights under Roman law, and the perceived need for some kind of land redistribution, known to the Romans as an "agrarian law."

One of Rome's greatest strengths had always been her unity. With the exception, centuries before, of the treason of Coriolanus and his defection to Rome's sworn enemies, the Volscians, Rome had always

managed to solve her internal disputes without resort to violence or betrayal. Even episodes of plebeian unrest, such as the First Plebeian Secession, had always been settled through peaceful compromise. But with the tumult under the Gracchi, the waning Roman Republic entered a new, more perilous stage of decline, in which demagogues incited civil unrest with welfare-state programs, and a new generation of ambitious politician-generals began to covet absolute power.



Mob rule: In one of Rome's first experiences with civil unrest, Caius Gracchus, demagogue and would-be reformer, flees from a murderous mob. Like his older brother Tiberius, Caius proposed unwise solutions to long-standing social grievances — and paid the ultimate price at the hands of bloodthirsty partisans.

Class Warfare

While Rome was assembling her overseas empire, various problems, both civil and constitutional, continued to fester at home. Foremost among them was the growing disparity between the wealthy patricians on the one hand and the masses of plebeians and slaves on the other. Slavery in ancient Rome was not, as practiced more recently in Europe and the United States, solely or even primarily dependent on imported chattels from conquered lands. It was part of Roman civil law: parents under certain circumstances could sell their children into slavery, and desperate citizens sometimes even sold themselves into slavery to avoid debts and other problems.

Because of Rome's longstanding practice of granting or selling real estate acquired through conquest to certain powerful patrician families, the wealthy few became wealthier still, while the numbers of the enslaved swelled. "The rich," explained the historian Appian, "gained possession of most of the undistributed land.... They used persuasion or force to buy or seize property which adjoined their own, or any other smallholdings belonging to poor men, and came to operate great

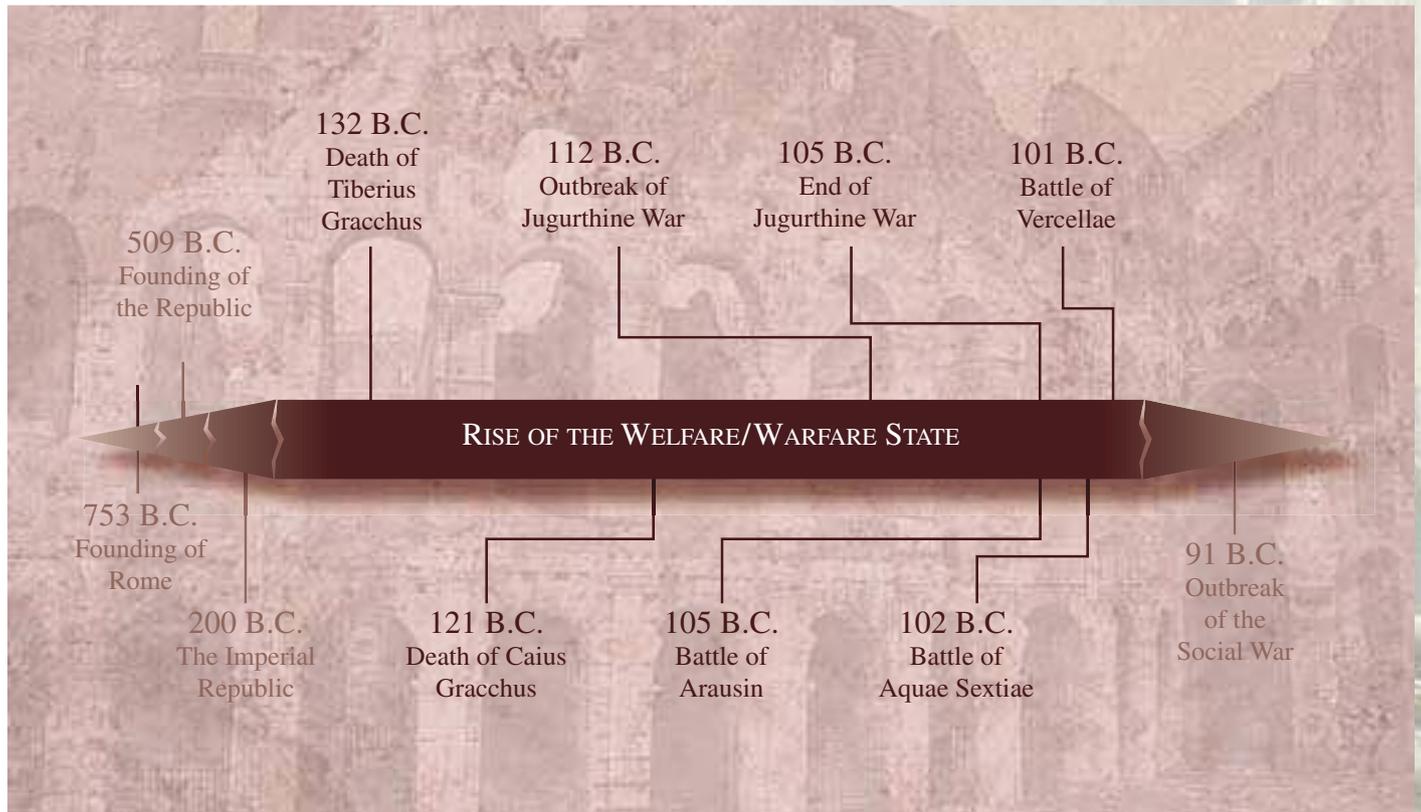
ranches instead of single farms. They employed slave hands and shepherds in the estates to avoid having free men dragged off to serve in the army, and they derived great profit from this form of ownership too, as the slaves had many children and no liability to military service and their numbers increased freely. For these reasons the powerful were becoming extremely rich, and the number of slaves in the country was reaching large proportions, while the Italian people were suffering from depopulation and a shortage of men, worn down as they were by poverty and taxes and military service." Romans, in other words, were losing their livelihood to armies of slaves on vast estates, while enduring higher and higher taxes and the ravages of endless war.

For these ills, the Gracchi offered an equally unpalatable solution: confiscating land from Rome's wealthy classes and forcibly redistributing it among the poor. The first, Tiberius, while serving as a plebeian tribune, successfully pushed for an agrarian law stipulating that no land-

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owner should hold more than 500 jugera (one Roman jugerum equaled roughly 5/8 of an acre). Under Tiberius' measure, the state would buy back from the landowners those holdings of land exceeding this limit, and would redistribute them among the poor. Three men, or triumvirs, would oversee the redistribution; they were to be Tiberius Gracchus himself, his younger brother Caius, and his father-in-law Ap-pius Claudius.

Not surprisingly, the wealthy bitterly opposed Tiberius' agrarian law. His colleague, the tribune Octavius, went so far as to veto the measure to prevent it from being passed. Tiberius Gracchus,





Failed reforms: The Gracchi brothers proposed to rectify unjust Roman property laws by forcible land redistribution, which inflamed rather than mollified partisan passions.

however, declaring that no tribune was qualified for office who was unwilling to carry out the will of the people in support of his bill, illegally ousted his rival. The bill was then passed by the Assembly, but was denied funding by the Senate, which controlled the purse strings of the Roman government.

Gracchus then tried to usurp the Senate's prerogative by seizing monies bequeathed to Rome by a wealthy king, in order to fund his agrarian reform bill. He flouted Roman tradition by seeking re-election the following year, in spite of a longstanding custom that prohibited the same man from holding the office twice in succession. This was enough for the senators and their patrician support base. On the day of the election, Gracchus appeared in the Forum with an armed entourage. Violence broke out, led by the senator Scipio Nasica, and Gracchus and several hundred supporters were killed.

A decade later, history repeated itself in the tragic career of the younger Gracchus, Caius. Caius revived his brother's land redistribution scheme, and added to it a multitude of other leveling measures, such as price controls on grain. Like Tiberius, Caius also ran for successive terms as tri-

bune. He too found himself the target of patrician wrath and met an untimely end, along with up to 3,000 of his backers.

The civil unrest associated with the Gracchi brothers is usually regarded as the beginning of Rome's long spiral into civil war and Caesarism. The actions of the Gracchi and of their opponents set yet another perilous precedent: that political differences could be resolved by using the power of mob violence to override the law. Before the time of the Gracchi, assassinations had been unknown in Rome; after their time, they quickly became routine.

After the defeat of Carthage, Rome's overseas expansion continued. In North Africa and in Iberia, Roman forces met with constant resistance and several significant setbacks. The Iberians were finally subdued, after decades of warfare, with the fall of the city of Numantia in 133 B.C. Conflict in Africa, however, was never to be completely resolved, and one African war in particular — the Jugurthine War — though relatively insignificant in terms of Roman lives and materiel lost, did incalculable long-term damage to the Roman state because it set the stage for the rise of the first Roman despots.

The Rise of Militarism

Jugurtha was a renegade king of Numidia, an important North African nation that at various times had been an important ally both of Carthage and of Rome. Numidia's greatest monarch, Massinissa, had been a Roman ally in the Second Punic War, but his illegitimate grandson Jugurtha, after killing off a rival heir, incurred the enmity of Rome by seeking to enlarge his inherited kingdom and by killing some Roman merchants in the process. Though not a particularly gifted military tactician, Jugurtha was a master of intrigue and managed to keep the Romans off-balance with a mixture of well-placed bribes and feigned compliance.

In 112 B.C., however, war finally broke out, and for several years Jugurtha, taking advantage of the desert terrain, the harsh climate, and the mobility of his lightly armed forces, managed to fend off the Roman military. After five years, however, Rome appointed a new consul, Caius Marius, whose name, along with that of his right-hand man and eventual rival Lucius Sulla, was to become a hiss and a byword for future generations of Romans.

Marius changed the makeup of Rome's military by turning the former all-civilian corps into professional volunteers. Moreover, whereas property ownership had formerly been a requirement for Roman soldiers, the Marian reforms led to the recruitment of vast numbers of poor, propertyless plebeians whose prospects could be enhanced if land were redistributed to them. This encouraged tension between the military and the Senate, most of whose members opposed land redistribution. It was also a strong incentive for Rome's new professional soldiery to be less loyal to the far-away Roman government than to the military leaders they served under.

The deadly rivalry that grew up between Marius and Sulla began in the Jugurthine War. When Jugurtha was eventually captured by the Romans after being betrayed by an unreliable ally, both men claimed credit for his defeat, but soon patched up their public differences. Marius' stock with the Roman people rose still further during the war with the Cimbri and Teutoni, two ferocious German tribes that invaded Gaul in 109 B.C. They inflicted a catastrophic defeat on Roman forces at Arausio in 105, wiping out two entire armies total-

ing as many as 80,000 men, many of whom had been pinned against a river. This, the worst Roman defeat since Cannae, opened the way for the first Germanic invasion of Italy in 102 B.C., and Marius proved equal to the challenge. He dealt first with the Teutoni and their allies at Aquae Sextiae as they marched towards the Alps in what is now south-east France.

The battle was one of the bloodiest in history and cost up to 130,000 lives, wiping out the forces of the Teutones. The victorious Marius then turned his attention to the Cimbri, who had managed to penetrate northern Italy. In a decisive encounter at Vercellae, his forces slaughtered up to 100,000 more Germans, ending the German threat for several generations.

The numbers of battle dead are truly staggering, even to the modern mind. In a single war consisting mostly of three major battles, nearly 300,000 men had perished, an astonishing figure when the smaller populations in Europe of that day are taken into account. In the second half of the second century B.C. alone, Roman dominions had been the setting for bloodshed and slaughter on a scale seldom seen, much less surpassed, in human history. The Third Punic War had cost as many as three quarters of a million lives, while wars in Iberia and North Africa had claimed many tens of thousands more. Rome's wars were becoming bigger, bloodier, and more frequent, and her adversaries more and more determined. At the same time, Roman forces became more and more ruthless, giving little quarter and asking none.

But worse was yet to come. In the turbulent, blood-soaked first century B.C. that would see the final end of the republic, the fearsome Roman armed forces, with their formidable discipline and awesome military machines, would be turned upon Rome herself and visit on the Roman people the same horrors that they had become accustomed to inflict upon the rest of the world. ■



Despot-in-waiting: Caius Marius, distinguished Roman military leader in wars against Jugurtha, the Cimbri, and the Teutones, reclines against the ruins of Carthage. Marius, by later introducing Rome to the horrors of despotism, started Rome down the same road that fallen Carthage had followed.