

The Republic Matures

The Roman Republic was not built in a day, but was the product of generations of reform and even some serious reverses.

by Steve Bonta

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

About 15 years after the founding of the Roman Republic in 509 B.C., an apparition appeared one day in the Roman Forum. It was no phantom or divine portent, though, but a flesh-and-blood figure, a pale and emaciated old man dressed in rags who soon attracted a large crowd of curious onlookers. Displaying a chest covered with battle scars, the wild-haired old man announced that he had fought bravely for Rome during the war with the Sabines. Then, to gasps of indignation, he displayed his back to his audience. It was covered with hideous scars

and wounds, some of them very recent, from tortures received in debtors' prison.

He had, he explained to the onlookers, been deprived of his livelihood. Having served in many wars, he was unable to cultivate his lands. Enemy armies had burnt his property and driven away his cattle. Worse still, he had been assessed crippling taxes, which he could only pay by taking on heavy debt. As a result, he had lost his property and had been delivered to "a house of correction and a place of execution" as punishment.

The man's story was by no means unusual. Rome, despite having ousted the cruel Etruscan monarch Tarquin the Proud, remained an oligarchic state ruled by the aristocratic patricians. The plebeians or underclass remained disenfranchised, with little representation in Roman government

(all senators and consuls were patricians), but providing the bulk of Rome's military forces. Most plebeians depended for their livelihood on farming, an activity that was frequently disrupted by warfare. Moreover, the new lands annexed by Rome as spoils of war were invariably parceled out to patricians, widening the gap between the urban gentry, who controlled the machinery of state and exploited the laws to amass more and more wealth, and the rural underclass, who were systematically divested of their landholdings by war, debt and heavy taxes.

Discontent and Reforms

Popular resentment boiled over that day in the Forum, as the wretched old man's testimony reminded the assembled masses of the injustices of Rome's class-based



The Roman Forum: Even the ruins of Rome's political and social hub still display fragments of the majesty of the Eternal City in her prime.

system of government. Before long Rome was in complete turmoil, as angry mobs demanded political representation and even threatened to assassinate the consuls. The Roman Republic, in spite of its many strengths, had serious flaws that only drastic reforms could mend.

Before long, the exasperated plebeians emigrated en masse from Rome to a nearby mountain in what has come to be known as the First Plebeian Secession. They demanded more active representation in the republican government, and were rewarded with the creation of the office of the tribune, a special magistrate who represented the plebeians. There were originally two tribunes, but more were added with the passage of time. The tribunes held veto power over laws, elections and actions of all magistrates except dictators, who in the Roman Republic were appointed for six-month spans to lead Rome through extreme military crises.

Unfortunately, another cause of plebeian discontent, the inequity of property laws, particularly regarding newly acquired territory, was never adequately addressed. An early attempt at a so-called “agrarian law,” which would reform the division of public land, was attempted by a consul named

Spurius Cassius. His proposal was blocked by patrician influence, however, and Cassius himself was eventually tried and executed for alleged treason. During the later history of the republic, the absence of a just “agrarian law” resurfaced periodically. Eventually, during the administrations of the Gracchi in the Second Century B.C., this contentious issue became the spark that lit the fuse leading to a long series of civil wars — wars that ended with the rise of the Caesars.

The Need for Written Laws

Even with the tribunes in place, the plebeians chafed under another form of legal abuse. Rome had no body of written laws. Therefore, the patricians, the self-anointed guardians of Roman law, interpreted the law however they saw fit — and always with their own class interests in mind. The plebeians, demanding equal representation under the law, pressed for a written legal code that could be read and understood by all.

In response to pressure for a code of written laws, the Senate, in about 450 B.C., sent a commission of three men to Greece to study the Greek legal code, particularly the laws devised by Solon, the

great Greek statesman and lawgiver. The Romans then appointed a council of 10 men, the Decemvirs. They were charged with producing a body of laws that would protect the rights of the Roman people, and that would be inscribed in stone and remain unchanged. After much deliberation, the Decemvirs produced the famed Twelve Tables of Roman Law.

The Twelve Tables are sometimes characterized as a Roman constitution. However, they had far more in common with ancient legal codes like the Code of Hammurabi and the law books of ancient Israel than with modern written constitutions like the U.S. Constitution. The Twelve Tables were a code of civil laws that protected the rights of citizens rather than defining the powers and offices of the Roman state.

From a modern perspective, those portions of the Twelve Tables that have come down to us are something of a mixed bag. On the one hand, the Tables gave debtors certain protections, such as a 30-day grace period to pay debts (Table III) and outlawing capital punishment without conviction (Table IX). On the other, the Tables required the killing of deformed infants (Table IV), prescribed the death penalty for slander and “giving false witness” (Table



Turning the Tables: Appius Claudius (center) and the other Decemvirs were appointed by the Senate to produce a written law code for Rome. They produced the celebrated Twelve Tables to protect the rights of Roman citizens, but, refusing to relinquish power once the task was finished, became despots themselves.

VIII), and forbade marriage between patricians and plebeians (Table XI). But with the creation of a written code of laws, which were engraved on 12 stone tablets and kept in the Forum, the Roman Republic was solidified. The Twelve Tables became, like the English Magna Carta, a palpable symbol of Roman liberty, and they served as an effective restraint on the arbitrary interpretation of Roman law.

From Lawgivers to Despots

The story of the Decemvirs, however, did not end with the creation of the Twelve Tables. Led by the charismatic and ambitious Appius Claudius, the Decemvirs refused to step down and attempted to usurp government power. They managed to curry favor with many young patri-

cians and hired many of them as personal military escorts. Thus protected, they were impervious to popular threats. Senators and plebeians alike found themselves under the decemviral yoke. Despite the persecutions, many plebeians took great satisfaction in the Decemvirs' treatment of prominent patricians, while others looked in vain to the patricians for leadership against the new oppressors. "Liberty," wrote Livy, "was now deplored as lost forever; nor did any champion stand forth, or appear likely to do so."

As with the crisis under Tarquin the Proud, so under Appius Claudius and the

Moral strength has to be accounted one of the reasons for Rome's rise to greatness. In contrast with most of their contemporaries, the Romans were a moral people, renowned for their honorable dealings even with enemies, and zealous upholders of family values.

Decemvirs, Rome's salvation came as a result of the abuse of a woman. In this case, Appius Claudius developed a consuming lust for a certain virtuous plebeian maiden named Virginia. After failing to seduce the young woman with bribes and other



Innocent blood: The persecution of the virtuous Virginia by the Decemvir-turned-despot Appius Claudius led her father to take her life to save her from rape and slavery. The shocking event incited the Romans to rise up and overthrow the tyrannical Decemvirs.

Only when the later Romans succumbed to moral depravity did Rome cease to produce leaders of the caliber of Camillus, Poplicola and Scipio. Only then did she become easy prey to foreign military powers; only then was she wracked with unending civil unrest.

inducements, Appius turned to violence. He attempted to have Virginia seized and enslaved, provoking a hue and cry among the commons.

At first Icilius, Virginia's husband-to-be, tried to reason with Appius: "Though you have taken from us the aid of our tribunes, and the power of appeal to the commons of Rome, the two bulwarks for maintaining our liberty," Icilius protested, "absolute dominion has not, therefore, been given to you over our wives and children. Vent your fury on our backs and necks; let chastity at least be secure." Virginius, Virginia's father, was summoned home in haste from the front, where he found the machinery of tyranny moving relentlessly against his innocent daughter. Appius was preparing to seize Virginia by force in the Forum, when Virginius confronted him. "To Icilius, and not to you, Appius, have I betrothed my daughter," he told the smirking Decemvir, "and for matrimony, not prostitution, have I brought her up. Do you wish men to gratify their lust promiscuously like cattle and wild beasts? Whether these persons will endure such things, I know not; I hope that those will not who have arms in their hands."

At this implied threat, Appius ordered his men to clear away the crowd protecting Virginia. In despair, her father asked if he might have a moment alone with his daughter before delivering her into bondage. Seizing a knife, he stabbed his daughter to death, crying, "In this one way, the only one in my power, do I secure to you your liberty." Virginius himself then led a revolt that overthrew the Decemvirs. Appius was thrown into prison, where he took his own life, and Roman liberty was restored.

Both the expulsion of the Tarquins and the overthrow of the Decemvirs were

prompted by attacks on Roman women. For this reason, these two episodes were often held up by later historians as evidence of the moral rectitude of the early Roman Republic. The dissolute Empire of later centuries, which Juvenal famously condemned for its addiction to "bread and circuses," placed no such premium on chastity, feminine or otherwise. But the early Romans, if the stories of

Lucretia and Virginia are to be believed, valued the honor of their women so highly that they were willing to defy tyrants to preserve it.

A Moral Society

Moral strength, in fact, has to be accounted one of the reasons for Rome's rise to greatness. While the Romans lacked some of the civilizing virtues introduced by Christianity, there can be no question that, in contrast with most of their contemporaries, the Romans were a moral people, renowned for their honorable dealings even with enemies, and zealous upholders of family values.

Such a society tends to produce outstanding leaders, and early Rome was no exception. Marcus Furius Camillus, sometimes called the "Second Founder of Rome," epitomized the virtuous heroism of the Roman Republic at its peak. Camillus first earned renown by successfully storming the city of the Veii, which the Romans had been besieging for 10 years. His next success came against the Faliscans at the siege of the well-fortified city of Falerii. According to tradition, a certain schoolmaster inside Falerii used his influence to trick a group of schoolchildren into following him outside the city walls. There he delivered them into the hands of the Romans, with the suggestion that they be used as hostages to persuade the people of Falerii to surrender.

When the Falerian traitor was brought to Camillus, the latter was, according to Plutarch, "astounded at the treachery of the act, and, turning to the standers-by, observed that 'war, indeed, is of necessity attended with much injustice and violence! Certain laws, however, all good men observe even in war itself, nor is victory so great an object as to induce us

to incur for its sake obligations for base and impious acts. A great general should rely on his own virtue, and not on other men's vices.'" Having rebuked the man, Camillus had him stripped and bound with ropes, and ordered rods and scourges to be given to the children. The children then drove their treasonous schoolmaster back to the city, where the astonished citizens, having already discovered the disappearance of their children, expected the worst. When their children were returned to them unharmed and the traitor in their midst delivered up for punishment, they counseled together and decided to surrender to Camillus, confident that they could trust the character of a man who adhered to such high moral standards even in wartime.

Camillus paid a severe price for his principled actions at Falerii. His soldiers were indignant at being denied the spoils from a city that had surrendered voluntarily. Many of Rome's citizenry were disappointed at losing the opportunity to oust the inhabitants of the great city and resettle it themselves, as had been the usual Roman custom with conquered cities. In consequence, Camillus found himself the target of a political smear campaign and finally resolved to go into exile.

Not long after Camillus left Rome, the Gauls, led by Brennus, occupied and sacked the city of Rome in about 390 B.C. Their capture of the city was accompanied by a fearful slaughter in which men, women and children were indiscriminately put to the sword. The desperate senators barricaded themselves inside the Capitol and sent word to Camillus, begging him to return and save the city from the Gaulish marauders. Camillus accepted the appointment of dictator, raised a military force, and destroyed the Gaulish host almost to a man.

Camillus led several other noteworthy military campaigns against such perennial foes as the Volscians and the Aequans, and continued active in public affairs into old age, until finally succumbing to the plague during an epidemic. For his selfless devotion to the republic, his unshakeable integrity, and his judgment as a military leader, Camillus exemplified the principled soldier-statesmen who led the republic to greatness during its best years.

Rome's greatest strength was her ability to produce men of the caliber of Ca-

millus. As late as the Second Punic War in the late 3rd century B.C., when Rome was already building an overseas empire, Scipio (later surnamed Africanus), another great military leader, had taken captive the bride-to-be of an Iberian prince named Allucius. Allucius himself was brought before Scipio and assured that his future wife had not been mistreated in any way by his men. "This only reward I bargain for in return for the service I have rendered you," he told the grateful young prince, "that you would be a friend to the Roman people; and if you believe that I am a true man,... that you would feel assured that in the Roman state there are many like us; and that no nation in the world at the present time can be mentioned ... with which you would rather be in friendship."

The greatness of Rome was a reflection of the greatness of her people. In an altogether different age, when the might of ancient Rome was already distant history, another sovereign, John Cantacuzenus, one of the last rulers of Byzantium, contemplating the imminent ruin of his people, observed:

There is nothing more conducive to the destruction of a nation ... than the lack of men of wisdom or intellect. When a republic has many citizens ... of high quality it quickly recovers from those losses that are brought about by misfortune. When such men are lacking, it falls into the very depths of disgrace.

As long as the Roman Republic produced men and women of integrity, its vitality was assured. Rome remained nearly impervious to external military threat, and avoided the scourge of civil war and other debilitating internal crises. On the rare occasions when Rome saw her freedom threatened by external or internal threats, she always displayed resourcefulness and resiliency. Only when the later Romans succumbed to moral depravity did Rome cease to produce leaders of the caliber of Camillus, Poplicola and Scipio. Only then did she become easy prey to foreign military powers; only then was she wracked with unending civil unrest. ■



Scipio Africanus: The most illustrious of the Scipios, Africanus earned his title by leading Roman forces to victory against Hannibal and his Carthaginians in the decisive Battle of Zama in North Africa. His military prowess aside, Scipio was noted for his upright character.