The Emergence of a Monarch in Ancient Rome

Ross Ledding

LBST 390-03

Professor Nanci Lucas

Sunday June 23, 2019
In 509 BCE, the people of Ancient Rome swore an oath never to let any man become king. However, less than 500 years later, Augustus Caesar would become the king of Rome in all but name after defeating his enemy Marcus Antonius at the Battle of Actium. While the aforementioned oath may have been a detail added to the history books by later generations, it nevertheless represented the very real Ancient Roman concern of monarchy. Throughout the Republican years, Rome’s government was characterized by checks and balances in order to prevent the emergence of one-man rule. Still, in 31 BCE with the rise of Augustus complete, the system had shown to be a failure, despite its longevity. So, what were the conditions that allowed for the rise of Augustus and the disintegration of a century-old system of government? Perhaps the most important condition was the issue of land ownership. This issue directly led to political violence and division, and also military reforms that transferred military loyalty from the state to generals.

During the Republican period, the Roman army consisted of several classes of soldiers based upon the amount of land owned. Only Roman citizens meeting a minimum property requirement were allowed to fight in the military. As a result, the rural population of farmers were the main contributors to the Roman army.\(^1\) Several factors led to the deterioration of this pool of landowners that became a serious concern in the late Republican era.

Originally, Roman wars were seasonal campaigns against local adversaries, allowing citizens to return afterwards in order to tend their land. However, as the empire expanded, wars became more protracted and were fought far from the city of Rome. For example, after the Punic Wars, the Roman empire grew significantly with the addition of Northern Africa,

Southern Spain and also Sicily. This meant that soldiers spent significant periods of time absent from their properties, resulting in their farms falling into ruins or being mortgaged for the purpose of supporting their families. Many of these farmers became displaced, only to become part of the urban mob of landless, jobless citizens within Rome. Moreover, these lands largely came into the hands of wealthy senators who owned large estates. Thus, the Italian countryside came to be dominated by a small group of wealthy citizens.

With Ancient Rome’s significant expansion, public lands (or ager publicus) were also created and left for common use by citizens. However, wealthy individuals, such as the aforementioned senatorial elite, illegally seized large portions of these lands for the development of latifundia (large estates or ranches). Again, the wealthy elite began to dominate land ownership in the late Republican era.

By 133 BCE, a noble by the name of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus was elected to the position of Tribune of the Plebs. Tiberius planned to introduce bills related to land reform in order to increase the number of landowning citizens and, as a result, the number of citizens eligible to participate in military service. According to one story, Tiberius’s motivation for these reforms arose after he witnessed the miserable state of the lands and the peasants north of Rome. Gracchus’ plan pertained to the significant territory acquired by the government through the victory of the Punic Wars. These new public lands were to be divided into small individual allotments for use by the poor citizens of Rome, with only three hundred acres apiece being left for the territory’s existing tenants.

---

Tiberius’ land reform unsurprisingly drew significant opposition from wealthy senators, and even his own fellow tribune, Octavius, who vetoed his proposal. Conflict continued between the two factions through Gracchus attempting to have Octavius impeached, and also the Senate denying the funds needed for Gracchus’s land reform commission.\(^7\) Throughout his term in office, Tiberius made many powerful enemies and people began to suspect that his extreme actions were directed towards gaining autocratic control of the Roman state.\(^8\) Thus, a brawl broke out between Gracchus’ supporters and many senators (along with their clients) as the Assembly’s electoral meeting was about to take place on the Capitoline. Tiberius was killed along with hundreds of his supporters. The Republic had begun to crumble.

Ten years later, Tiberius’ younger brother, Gaius was elected Tribune of the Plebs in 123 BCE. Gaius reaffirmed his brother’s agrarian proposals, but also went further in limiting Senatorial power in regards to the law courts.\(^9\) Ultimately, Gaius faced a fate similar to that of his brother; after a scuffle that resulted in the death of a consul’s servant, the consul, Opimius, convinced the Senate to pass a declaration of public emergency.\(^10\) Thereafter, Opimius led a group of Senators and knights to attack Gaius, killing him and many of his supporters.\(^11\)

While Tiberius and Gaius had been killed, the effects of their actions would live on and contribute to the death of the Republic less than a century later. The brothers, for one, helped create or at least solidify a steep divide between political factions. The Optimates (who held conservative, oligarchic views) and the Populares (who favoured the cause of the

\(^7\) Flower, *Roman Republics*, 91.
\(^8\) Grant, *History of Rome*, 171
\(^9\) Ibid., 175
\(^10\) Ibid., 176.
commoners) were now willing to use violence as a means of achieving their desired goals. This meant that effective, peaceful governance within the framework of the traditional Roman government was no longer feasible. Also, the conflict and violence that was initiated by the Gracchan actions set a precedent for later generals who would march on Rome only decades later.

Despite the significant effects of the Gracchus brothers on fall of the Republic, there was simply no reasonable process for a monarch to emerge without the Marian military reforms of 107 BCE. Two years earlier, Rome declared war on Jugurtha, the king of the western partition of Numidia. After two expeditionary forces initially failed and another general Quintus Metellus struggled, Gaius Marius was appointed to defeat the Numidians. Yet, Marius, in realizing the shortage of landowning citizens that could be recruited into his army, ignored the property qualifications for service and accepted all landless volunteers on a large scale. Later, Marius would eliminate the property requirement for military service altogether, allowing landless citizens to enlist. As a result, the government supplied the soldiers with armor and weapons along with pay. Moreover, Marius standardized training and equipment within the army, aiding in the creation of a professional military force. Marius also created a feeling of espirit de corps through innovations such as the creation of unique military standards for each cohort, and also a silver eagle for every legion in the military.

Subsequently, these reforms ultimately helped shift military loyalty from the state towards the generals who commanded and payed them. Soldiers became dependent on their generals and comrades for their livelihood. This is demonstrated brilliantly as Marius’s soldiers soon became known as “Marius’s Mules.” Gaius Marius’ soldiers would even

---

13 Ibid., 179.
follow him into Rome in 99 BCE as part of an improvised force in order to arrest the Tribune Saturninus on the orders of the Senate.\textsuperscript{15}

Now, the stage had been set for the destruction of the Republic. Internally, the political conflict of Rome was reaching a boiling point, while militarily, it had been shown that the possibility existed for an ambitious general to march on Rome with his loyal army. In 86 BCE, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, a staunch Optimate, marched on Rome with his legions after being denied the command against Mithridates of Pontus. Only three years later, he would march on the city again, initiating a reign of terror comprising of the killings of thousands of senators and equestrians.\textsuperscript{16} In 81 BCE, Sulla retired from public life and disbanded his legions, but Rome was not safe from another autocrat. Only decades later, Gaius Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River and initiated a four-year civil war, later being declared “dictator for life” (dictator perpetuo).

Nevertheless, despite a volatile political climate and ambitious generals commanding loyal soldiers, the Republic was not prepared to die. In 44 BCE, a group of Senators organized a plot to assassinate Caesar during a meeting of the Senate. Upon succeeding, the conspirators shouted that liberty had been restored.\textsuperscript{17} While all signals were pointing to the destruction of the Republic, Roman hatred of monarchs gave the Res Publica life. So, the final condition that led to the rise of an autocrat was the Roman people’s weariness of instability and war. Following Julius Caesar’s assassination, Rome fell victim to further internal military conflict that only ended with Augustus’s victory over Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius at the Battle of Actium. After years of strife and conflict, it seems that the Roman people simply wanted peace, and were willing to accept the rule of a monarch so long as he

\textsuperscript{15} Grant, \textit{History of Rome}, 180.
\textsuperscript{16} Shotter, \textit{The Fall of Rome}, 43.
\textsuperscript{17} Adrian Goldsworthy, \textit{Augustus: From Revolutionary to Emperor} (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2014), 79.
did not flaunt his power. According to Cassius Dio, upon the ascension of Augustus Caesar, there were many senators “who abhorred the republican constitution as a breeder of strife, were pleased at the change in government, and took delight in Caesar”.

For almost five hundred years, the Ancient Roman Republic endured and adapted. Yet, in 31 BCE, Rome was left under the control of one man, Augustus Caesar. At the core of the Republic’s issues was land distribution. In attempting to solve the problem, political factions became further divided, and violence became extremely prevalent. Furthermore, in attempting to solve the military implications of the land problem, Gaius Marius created the conditions for a military loyal to the general rather than the Roman state. Still, the deep-rooted fear of monarchy helped provide significant opposition to those hoping to rule, like Julius Caesar. Nevertheless, after relentless conflict and civil wars, Rome was exhausted and finally willing to accept peace and stability under the direction of one man, Augustus.

---

18 Ibid., 222.  
Bibliography


The overthrow of the Roman monarchy, a political revolution in ancient Rome, took place around 509 BC and resulted in the expulsion of the last king of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, and the establishment of the Roman Republic. The semi-legendary Roman histories tell that while the king was away on campaign, his son Sextus Tarquinius raped a noblewoman, Lucretia. Afterwards she revealed the offence to various Roman noblemen, and then committed suicide. The Roman noblemen, led by Lucius Junius Monarchy, The Seven Kings of Rome. In the early days of the fledgling settlement, Rome was governed by kings. Similar in many ways to the emperors that came later, these individual men had complete authority over all aspects of the lives of their subjects. A challenge to the king's authority would almost certainly lead to severe punishment, typically death. As kings and rulers of other countries and civilizations throughout history have found (often paying the price with their life), such totalitarian rule can only last so long. The end of the road came with Rome's seventh king, Tar. The Roman Republic emerged out of what one historian called the ashes of the monarchy. Years underneath the unyielding yoke of a king taught the people of Rome that they had to safeguard against the rule, and possible oppression, of one individual. The real authority or imperium of the republic, and later empire, was to be divided among three basic elements - elected non-hereditary magistrates, a Senate to advise and consent, and popular assemblies. Unfortunately for many people in Rome, in the early stages of the Republic, power lay solely in the hands of the elite, the old landowning famil...