

Crisis of the Republic: Sources

By the end of the second century Roman historical writing was flourishing. The development of intellectual life led to other forms of prose writing – treatises on oratory and law, letters. The Greeks continued to write on Rome, especially Posidonius, who picked up where Polybius left off. The only historical products of the late Republican period to survive, however, are the monographs of Sallust, the bios of Nepos, and the commentaries of Caesar. Everything else has to be pieced together from fragments and epitomes.

The most important later sources are Greek. Appian, who wrote his accounts of the wars in the mid second century, and Dio Cassius, who wrote a giant annalistic chronicle under the Severans. Plus the lives of Plutarch.

But the most important source by far is Cicero. We have his letters and speeches, and so for fifty odd years have a direct voice, plus plenty of references to the fifty years preceding him. Certainly there are problems – he falsifies much in his speeches and his letters to people besides Atticus can be dishonest, obscure, or dissambling.

Nor are the later writers free of problems. Plutarch, Appian, etc. all rely on primary sources too, and these included encomiastic biographies and invectives about the leading figures of the time. Even Asinius Pollio, who lies behind much of Plutarch, is contaminated by his support for Caesar and disdain for Cicero.

Inscriptions are scanty for this period, as is the archaeological evidence, although coin finds are quite rich.

Things are well covered from 70 onwards, but from the fall of Carthage down to 70 it isn't good, while 80-70 is horrible. The Sullan period is well documented militarily, but poorly politically.

So this is very difficult to write about, since we lack the appropriate background. Too often surviving sources frame it as a battle of the demagogues versus the senate. Often the demagogues, such as Saturninus, have uniformly hostile sources, although it is mixed for the Gracchi. Occassionally, an historian writing in the late Republic will slip a current problem into the discussion of an ancient one.

Epigraphic and archaeological evidence provides some check. Fragments of a bronze tablet show a much bigger change in legal proceedings involving the recovery of property under C. Gracchus than the sources tell. The opposite side of the fragment shows that the Romans were already dividing up land in Corinth and Carthage in 111, something Appian passes over. Basically, from the Gracchi to Sulla we lack the sort of evidence to fully evaluate the sources we have.

Ancient Theories about the Late Republic

Polybius forecast that since everything was cyclic, Rome would eventually return to a monarchy. This would happen when having an empire led to increasing greed and ambition, demagoguery, leading to mob-rule and finally tyranny. This may be prophetic, or it may be from a revision during the Gracchi. Posidonius followed this, and it had a heavy influence. Later Roman authors liked to say it was inevitable that the Republic fell. Rome couldn't bear the burden of greed, corruption, ambition when it had no external check like Carthage. Such ideas probably date back to the destruction of Carthage.

Certainly, luxury, greed, et al abounded in the later 2nd century. Cato inveighed against corruption. Scipio Aemilianus denounced mixed-sex dancing in the same speech he denounced T. Gracchus. Certainly vice existed before, but it grew with empire.

But there is more than aristocratic failings. Agrarian problems were noted by Appian and Sallust, as the rich took over more and more land at the expense of the poor. But Sallust also declared that the leaders of the plebs were fraudulent and were using strife to seek personal power.

Both Plutarch and Appian treat the Gracchi well, at least. This is partly because of C. Gracchus left a biography, because they had noble birth but tragic lives, but also because Cicero and others used their names to disparage other demagogues. Meanwhile, the most conservative members of the aristocracy, like Cato, L. Opimius, etc. were revered.

Generals don't fare much better. Sallust was remembered for proscriptions, Marius for being corrupt in general. Pompey was treated mildly, at least for a while, but for Lucan, Seneca and Tacitus he is as blameworthy as Caesar. By the time of Cassius Dio, people weren't obsessed with casting blame.

Modern Interpretations

Mommsen treated the conflict between the optimates and the populares as something akin to political parties fighting it out in the senate. He agreed with Sallust that Roman politics was a struggle between members of the aristocracy, since elections were won on personality not programmes. Mommsen also believed the Republic deserved to be overthrown since it oppressed peasant farmers in Italy. The struggle should have been between the peasants and the aristocrats, but it only happened via demagogues. The Empire was run by a group of corrupt men who deserved to be overthrown and replaced with a man of the people – Caesar.

Mommsen's followers tend to accept that the late republic was an aristocratic state with bogus appeals to the mob. Eduard Meyer felt that Caesar wanted to be a monarch, while Pompey wanted something like the principate – a ruler with the aristocracy around him. Gelzer showed how the aristocracy tended to monopolize offices, and that the difference between optimates and

populares was that the populares worked through the popular assembly. This fitted the evidence better than Mommsen's parliamentary thing.

Münzer used prosopography to show that the optimates were divided into factions on family lines that were struggling through dominance by any means – demagoguery, violence, etc. Syme took this and ran with it.

L. R. Taylor argued that the difference between optimates and populares wasn't devoid of ideology and that the groups were distinguished by their methods. Christian Meier argued that the aristocracy used the plebs only to secure its own interests, and that the major populares ideas on liberty were no longer valid. He opposed the factional struggle of Münzer and suggested that the patron-client relationship brought a representative element into the senate. The system was brought down because the oligarchy failed to assimilate the wealthy men outside the senate and the professional armies under long-term commanders.

Erich Gruen accepted that politics was a struggle of families, but that they were carried out within understood certain limits. Even a little violence was acceptable. Lintott believes that it was just this violence that conflicts between various aristocratic leaders exploded into civil war.

Brunt believes that Gelzer was right, but that the populares did represent some general popular interests, and could only gain power by satisfying general popular discontent.

Most modern interpretations agree on the background and that there were political parties of some sort. But how far can popular activity be subsumed into the aristocratic political game, or was it subversive in some way. Cicero says that the optimates and populares were irreconcilable in their views.