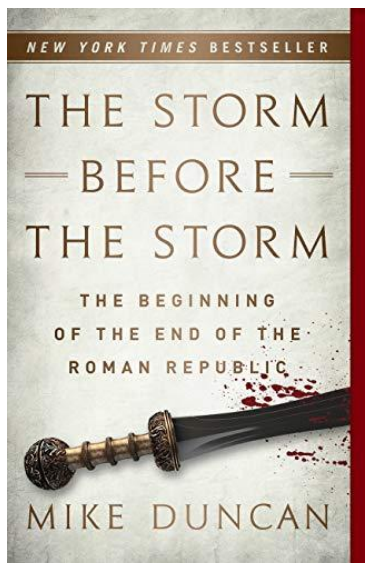




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The Storm Before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic

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9 Highlights | Geel (9)

Pagina 3

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 3

The new Roman Republic was not a freewheeling democracy. Families that could trace their lineage back to the original senators appointed by Romulus were known as the patricians and by both custom and law these families monopolized all political and religious offices. Anyone outside this small aristocratic clique was called plebeian. All plebeians—whether poor farmer, prosperous merchant, or rich landowner—were shut out of power. It did not take long for the plebs to agitate for equal rights. As the historian Appian says: “The plebeians and Senate of Rome were often at strife with each other concerning the enactment of laws, the cancelling of debts, the division of lands, or the election of magistrates.” The running battle between patrician and pleb became known as the Conflict of the Orders.⁸ About fifteen years after the founding of the

Pagina 68

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 68

Gaius introduced legislation directing the state to purchase and stockpile grain and then sell it to citizens for a fixed price. Cicero later denounced the project as an obvious handout to secure political support and said that better men at the time “resisted it because they thought that its effect would be to lead the common people away from industry to idleness.” But this was not the free-grain dole that would later become a hallmark of imperial municipal policy. It was simply offering grain at a fixed price to create some semblance of stability. The plebs urbana loved the bill so much they made further expansion of subsidized grain their central political demand for the next hundred years.³⁰ Gaius

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 79

in the Forum.⁶¹ As the years passed the Gracchi name came to mean more than just the brothers: it stood for an array of programs and tactics that collectively represented a new popular movement in Roman politics. The standard popular programs included a grain dole for the urban poor, land for the rural poor, control of the courts with the Equestrians, secret ballots in the Assembly, subsidies for military service, and punishment of corrupt nobles. Tactically, the populars harnessed the democratic power of the Assembly rather than the aristocratic weight of the Senate. While popular leaders came and went, the citizens of Rome remained the same and would support those who offered them what they wanted. Opposing the populars were the optimates. Meaning literally “the best” or “the good,” the term invoked a variety of characteristics. But since Cicero is our main source, those characteristics tended to align with his own worldview. For Cicero, an optimate was a well-educated senator with an active interest in oratory, politics, and war, and skewing away from the severe Roman virtues in the mold of old Cato the Elder. An optimate senator was comfortable with exotic food and Greek ideas. These grandly sophisticated statesmen were the natural guardians of the Republic, standing as sentinels against enemies both foreign and domestic. For

Pagina 251

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 251

Sulla's suggestion was a shocking deviation from all accepted custom, but what was the Senate to do? Say no? It was like asking the legions surrounded in Numantia in 137 if they wanted to be slaughtered. So they complied with Sulla's request. To bridge the constitutional gap now that both sitting consuls were dead, the Senate revived the ancient office of interrex. The Republic had occasionally used an interrex to oversee consular elections if the consuls were dead or so indisposed that they could not return to Rome. Since this was obviously the case, the interrex convened the Assembly and presented a bill to make Sulla dictator legibus faciendis et reipublicae constitienae: “Dictator for the making of laws and settling of the constitution.” The Assembly passed the bill unanimously.¹⁸ With plenty of legal advisers on hand, and with a decent grasp of constitutional law himself, Sulla ensured his new title came with all requisite powers to act without constraint. As dictator, Sulla now had the power of life and death over all Romans. He had sole discretion over declarations of war and peace. He could appoint or remove senators. He could confiscate property at will. He could found new cities and colonies. He could punish and destroy existing cities. He had the final say in all matters in the provinces, the treasury, and the courts. Most importantly the dictator's every decree automatically became law. The enormous constitutional force of the Assembly now existed at Sulla's mere word.¹⁹

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 253

To his original kernel of reforms, the dictator Sulla introduced a package of new laws to place the Senate back at the center of the Republic.²¹ With the tribunate so often used to lob antisenatorial bombs, Sulla severely curtailed their power. Originally designed to protect the individual rights of plebeians, the office had morphed into a dangerous instrument of demagogues and tyrants. So in addition to requiring a tribune to seek permission from the Senate before introducing a bill, Sulla also abolished the all-purpose, all-powerful veto. A tribune could now only levy a veto in matters pertaining to individual requests for clemency. But more important than these procedural restrictions, Sulla decreed that men elected tribune were barred from all other magistracies. This prohibition ensured that ambitious young leaders would never seek the office again. What once had been a springboard into politics was now a dead end.²²

Pagina 258

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 258

THE SULLAN CONSTITUTION did not survive. In the first years of the new regime, the senior Sullan leaders who took over Rome—Metellus Pius, Pompey, and Crassus chief among them—scrupulously followed Sulla's constitution. But as the memory of Sulla faded and new political rivalries emerged, these leaders abandoned the Sullan decrees whenever expedient. In the end, it turned out Sulla's "final" settlement was just another milestone on the Republic's road to ruin. One

Pagina 259

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 259

The law curtailing the power of the tribunes lasted barely a decade. Despite Sulla's efforts, the popular path to power was still a viable option, and leaders curried favor with the people throughout the 70s by promising to restore the tribunes to their full dignity. The men who finally capitalized on this popular promise were Pompey and Crassus, who restored the ancient power of the tribunes during their shared consulship in 70. In that same year, the praetor Lucius Aurelius Cotta passed a law undoing Sulla's judicial laws and opening the jury pool to both the Senate and Equestrians. Sulla's attempt at Italian land redistribution fared no better. Just as had happened with the Gracchan program, within a generation Sulla's veterans had mostly sold their land to rich magnates, and the end result was the Italian peninsula being dominated by large estates like never before. The provisional reorganization was similarly inadequate. Even with Sulla's expanded roster of magistracies, the Roman Empire was still only run by perhaps a hundred men. It was not until the Augustan settlements that something resembling a permanent bureaucracy stabilized the corrupt and inadequate provisional administration.

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 263

But between Crassus and Pompey rose an ambitious young noble who would outshine them both: Gaius Julius Caesar. Having survived the proscription, Caesar emerged in the 70s as an ambitious young political talent. In 69, he took the provocative step of openly mourning the death of his aunt Julia—the wife of Gaius Marius. During her funeral procession, Caesar displayed images of Marius for the first time since Sulla's dictatorship. It annoyed the optimates in the Senate, but it ginned up a wave of popular sympathy for Marius, whom they had once called the Third Founder of Rome. This helped pave the way for the ban on proscribed families being lifted, but those who had felt the indignity of the proscription formed an unspoken bond, and an affinity for popular politics. Caesar skillfully exploited their lingering resentment.⁴⁹ While the nobles fought, Rome continued to expand. The war with Mithridates had never really ended. Undeterred by his earlier defeat, Mithridates launched a series of major wars against Rome that lasted all the way until his death, at the hands of Pompey the Great, in 63. With Mithridates finally defeated, Pompey took the legions on a grand tour of the eastern Mediterranean, organizing the east into a network of allied client kingdoms. When Pompey returned to Rome, Caesar successfully reconciled Pompey and Crassus and together they formed a secret alliance called the First Triumvirate that would dominate Rome for the next decade. The Triumvirate awarded land to Pompey's veterans, approved a war in Syria for Crassus, and made Caesar proconsul of Gaul. While Pompey remained in Rome, Caesar successfully conquered all of modern France. Crassus meanwhile was led into an ambush in Syria and died a gruesome death in 53.⁵⁰

Pagina 264

Highlight (Geel) | Pagina 264

The Centuriate Assembly elected Augustus consul, so he held consular authority. The Plebeian Assembly simultaneously elected him tribune, so he held tribunician authority. With that authority, Augustus could veto any bill and was immune from physical attack. The Senate also granted him proconsular power in all the provinces, making him commander in chief of almost all of Rome's armed forces. In time, he also became pontifex maximus and controlled the priesthoods and temples. Augustus maintained the charade of republican government throughout his reign. Annual elections proceeded as before, as did meetings of the Assembly. Augustus also met regularly with a senior council of senators to give them the appearance of equal participation. Augustus never created a new office of "emperor"—that is simply the label later Romans gave to the bound-together fascist of individual sovereign powers now collectively vested in the hands of one man. Augustus himself preferred to be called simply princeps—the first citizen among equals.⁵² But underneath the charade of