

The Murder of Tiberius Gracchus (133 B.C.E)

A tribune named Tiberius Gracchus proposed a land re-distribution plan that would place a limit on the amount of land any one individual could hold. His goal was to help the free farmer continue as a productive member of the Roman Republic. Members of the Senate murdered him. Tiberius' brother Gaius also proposed similar reforms 10 years later and met with the same fate. What follows is an excerpt from Plutarch's chronicle of the murder of Tiberius. The complete account can be read at:

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Tiberius_Gracchus*.html

19 Tiberius, accordingly, reported this to those who stood about him, and they at once girded up their togas, and breaking in pieces the spear-shafts with which the officers keep back the crowd, distributed the fragments among themselves, that they might defend themselves against their assailants. Those who were farther off, however, wondered at what was going on and asked what it meant. Whereupon Tiberius put his hand to his head, making this visible sign that his life was in danger, since the questioners could not hear his voice. But his opponents, on seeing this, ran to the senate and told that body that Tiberius was asking for a crown; and that his putting his hand to his head was a sign having that meaning. All the senators, of course, were greatly disturbed, and Nasica demanded that the consul should come to the rescue of the state and put down the tyrant. The consul replied with mildness that he would resort to no violence and would put no citizen to death without a trial; if, however, the people, under persuasion or compulsion from Tiberius, should vote anything that was unlawful, he would not regard this vote as binding. Thereupon Nasica sprang to his feet and said: "Since, then, the chief magistrate betrays the state, do ye who wish to succour the laws follow me." With these words he covered his head with the skirt of his toga and set out for the Capitol. All the senators who followed him wrapped their togas about their left arms and pushed aside those who stood in their path, no man opposing them, in view of their dignity, but all taking to flight and trampling upon one another.

5 Now, the attendants of the senators carried clubs and staves which they had brought from home; but the senators themselves seized the fragments and legs of the benches that were shattered by the crowd in its flight, and went up against Tiberius, at the same time smiting those who were drawn up to protect him. Of these there was a rout and a slaughter, and as Tiberius himself turned to fly, someone laid hold of his garments. So he let his toga go and fled in his tunic. But he stumbled and fell to the ground among some bodies that lay in front of him. As he strove to rise to his feet, he received his first blow, as everybody admits, from Publius Satyreius, one of his colleagues, who smote him on the head with the leg of a bench; to the second blow claim was made by Lucius Rufus, who plumed himself upon it as upon some noble deed. And of the rest more than three hundred were slain by blows from sticks and stones, but not one by the sword.

20 This is said to have been the first sedition at Rome, since the abolition of royal power, to end in bloodshed and the death of citizens; the rest though neither trifling nor raised for trifling objects, were settled by mutual concessions, the nobles yielding from fear of the multitude, and the people out of respect for the senate. And it was thought that even on this occasion Tiberius would have given way without difficulty had persuasion been brought to bear upon him, and would have yielded still more easily if his assailants had not resorted to wounds and bloodshed; for his adherents numbered not more than three thousand. But the combination against him would seem to have arisen from the hatred and anger of the rich rather than from the pretexts which they alleged; and there is strong proof of this in their lawless and savage treatment of his dead body. For they would not listen to his brother's request that he might take up the body and bury it by night, but threw it into the river along with the other dead. Nor was this all; they banished some of his friends without a trial and others they arrested and put to death. Among these Diophanes the rhetorician also perished. A certain Caius Villius they shut up in a cage, and then put in vipers and serpents, and in this way killed him. Blossius of Cumae was brought before the consuls, and when he was asked about what had passed, he admitted that he had done everything at the bidding of Tiberius. Then Nasica said to him, "What, then, if Tiberius had ordered thee to set fire to the Capitol?" Blossius at first replied that Tiberius would not have given such an order; but when the same question was put to him often and by many persons, he said: "If such a man as Tiberius had ordered such a thing, it would also have been right for me to do it; for Tiberius would not have given such an order if it had not been for the interest of the people." Well, then, Blossius was acquitted, and afterwards went to Aristonicus in Asia, and when the cause of Aristonicus was lost, slew himself. . . .