

# DECLINE OF REPUBLIC—ERA SUMMARY

146 TO 60 B.C.

## AGE OF GRACCHI TO POMPEY DEFEATS PIRATES

The last century of the Roman Republic is one of the most eventful periods in Roman history and produced many of the best-known Roman statesmen: the Gracchii, Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Cicero, and of course, Julius Caesar. Unfortunately, many of these events were tragic and regrettable rather than glorious or laudable, as is often the case when a civilization goes from being frugal and industrious to wealthy and luxurious. The crises of the Roman republic were more due to internal corruption and infighting rather than reactions to outside enemies. There were several dangerous enemies that Rome dealt with during this period, including [Jugurtha](#) in Africa, [Mithridates](#) in the east, and the [Cimbri and Teutonic Gauls](#) in northern Italy. It was not these enemies, however, that caused the collapse of the republican government, but rather, Rome's internal conflicts. As a notorious enemy of Rome once said, on the occasion of his bribery-secured acquittal, "Rome is a city for sale, and doomed to perish as soon as it finds a purchaser!"

The final century of the republic saw an increasingly bitter struggle between the aristocratic (or *optimae*) party, which controlled the senate, and the popular (or *Marian*) party, which insisted on greater influence for the masses. It is important to note, however, that both parties were led by wealthy, powerful, and often corrupt individuals, whose own interests lay in elevating themselves to political power. Both parties had the backing of many poor and disenfranchised citizens, who often chose their leaders based on patronage rather than political philosophy, and both parties were plagued by bribery, demagogues, and villainous power-seekers. Likewise, both parties had a defensible political philosophy and a program of reform, but as it became increasingly clear that a strong central government was necessary to hold the provinces together, both embraced dictators and strongmen as leaders. The transition to empire was less a victory of one party over another than the collapse of republican pretenses altogether.



MARIUS IN THE RUINS OF CARTHAGE

The decline of the republic began with bickering over the distribution of newly acquired land, resulting from [Roman conquests in Spain](#), Africa, and the east. The Gracchi brothers, [Tiberius Gracchus](#), and [Gaius Gracchus](#) initiated land reforms that would distribute more territory to landless Romans rather than wealthy barons, but these, naturally, were unpopular with the ruling classes. Both Gracchi were eventually murdered, but only after giving rise to a powerful

party dedicated to wealth redistribution and supported by the "Roman Mob", as well as members of the deserving poor.

Two generals arose to take the lead of these two parties, during the subsequent [Jugurthine War](#) in Africa and [Mithridatic Wars](#) in the east. These were [Marius](#), who led the popular party and [Sulla](#), who led the optimates. Both leaders were popular with the army and each led an army to march on the city of Rome and seize power by force, always using the abuses of the other as an excuse for further outrages. Once in power, first Marius and then Sulla ordered proscriptions, or the systematic murder of all their enemies. Needless to say, these proscriptions, which were carried out on a large scale over several years, had a disastrous effect on civil society. Not only were many innocent people killed, but political rivals became deadly enemies, and the confiscation of property of "proscribed" citizens, ruined families and encouraged egregious corruption.

Sulla, who last held sway in Rome, essentially obliterated the Marian party within Rome, but when his murderous work was done, he returned power to the senate and retired quietly. Marian sympathizers fled to the farthest outreaches of the empire. [Sertorius](#), a well-respected general in exile from Sulla, set up a rival empire in Spain which was a haven for political refugees and other outcasts, and the Roman army was unable to subdue him for over eight years.

Other crises that arose for Rome as a result of these disruptions were a [slave rebellion](#) led by the escaped gladiator [Spartacus](#), a resumption of the Mithridatic war in the east, and the rise of pirates in the Mediterranean. These crises were put down by three new generals who had appeared on the scene after the death of Sulla and Marius. They were [Crassus](#), a wealthy land speculator who put down the rebellion of Spartacus, [Lucullus](#), a capable but notoriously luxuriant general who brought the Mithridatic War to a close, and [Pompey](#), who in less than a year put down the pirates that had been plaguing traders of the Mediterranean for the last decade. Pompey eventually rose to great political power, favoring first the Marian party but later the optimates. However, it was less political philosophy than disgust with the worst of the populist demagogues that drove him into alliance with the aristocrats.