FREDERIK JULIAAN VERVAET

REFORM, REVOLUTION, REACTION

A SHORT HISTORY OF ROME FROM THE ORIGINS OF THE SOCIAL WAR TO THE DICTATORSHIP OF SULLA

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For Erich Gruen and my Students:
maximas gratias vobis ago

"He had left nothing for anyone else to distribute,
unless he wished to share out the mud or the air."

(saying attributed to M. Livius Drusus in Flor. 2.5.6-7)

"Ungrateful is Lucius Sulla, who healed his fatherland
by remedies that were harsher than her ills".

(Sen. *Ben.* 5.15.3)

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Introduction:
THE FIRST REVOLUTIONARY AGE OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC*

In the fateful year 1939, Ronald Syme (1903, New Zealand – 1989, Oxford) published his incisive and gripping history of what really was the second collapse of the Roman republican polity and the rise of the Augustan New Order from 60 BCE to 14 CE. Having witnessed as a young man the rise of first bolshevism and then Mussolini's fascism, Stalinism, and Hitler's national-socialism in continental Europe[1], he fittingly gave his seminal study the title *'The Roman Revolution'* as it endeavoured to tell the gritty story of the socio-political revolution that was the turbulent and violent transition from the most enduring aristocratic Republic of the pre-industrial era to an equally durable imperial autocracy under the ruthless leadership of Caesar Octavianus.

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* All dates in this history are BCE unless otherwise stated. Abbreviations for classical texts (and their authors), corpora and journals are those used in the 4th edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (for the full list see https://oxfordre.com/classics/page/3993). Solely responsible for the views espoused in this study as well as any remaining flaws and errors, I would like to thank the anonymous referees and the *Libera Res Publica* series editors for their constructive feedback and valuable suggestions. I am also much obliged to Dr James Tan and Tonya Rushmer for allowing me to read some of their stimulating work in press/progress. Finally, I would like to convey my everlasting gratitude to Dr Christopher Dart for his assistance with sourcing and editing the figures as well as designing two customized maps and producing the Indices. This research was partially funded by the Australian Government through a Discovery Project (DP210100870) awarded by the Australian Research Council.

1 On the (circumstances of the) genesis of Syme's monumental study, see García Vivas 2016.

None would contest that this indeed represents a truly revolutionary watershed in Rome's colourful history. Even if roughly a century before the events analysed by Syme the Gracchi brothers and M. Fulvius Flaccus (*cos.* 125) had already carried or proposed some radical – if not revolutionary – reforms[2], this book proceeds from the premise that the time span from the immediate antecedents of the outbreak of the Social War to the unparalleled dictatorship of Sulla *par excellence* represents the first revolutionary age of the Roman polity: like the epochal events studied by Syme, this era, too, saw multiple eruptions of large-scale internecine fighting, wholesale collapse and restoration, as well as a great many other historic developments and innovations that would forever change – and scar – the face of the Roman and Italian body politic.[3]

Unlike the era studied extensively by Syme and many others before and after him, however, Roman history from the origins of the Social War to the epochal dictatorship of Cornelius Sulla tends to be relatively well known but poorly understood, not least because the extant body of source material resembles the remains of an old library after thorough bombardment, and we furthermore have no more or less contemporary Italic literary sources. Whilst there is no shortage of fine and substantial scholarship addressing some of the key aspects of this period – e.g. the Social War or (the ensuing clash between) Marius and Sulla[4] – there remains a distinct opening for a

2 For extensive further reading on the Gracchan reforms, see Santangelo 2007b; Tan 2017: 60-65 & 144-170; and Gabrielli 2022 (with special attention to the emergence of lethal physical violence in Roman politics and close consideration of post-factum elite justification strategies as reflected in the ancient historiographical tradition). The reforms of the Gracchi will be discussed in this analysis only in so far as they are relevant to, or planted the seeds for, developments in the period here considered.

3 With regard to both the period here considered and that studied by Syme, the term 'revolution' can be interpreted as signifying both "an alteration, a change; esp. a dramatic or wide-reaching change in conditions, the state of affairs" and the "overthrow of an established government or social order by those previously subject to it; forcible substitution of a new form of government" – "in early use also: rebellion": see the current online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary: https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/164970. Comp. also Flower 2010b: 74: "While the general escalation of violence in political life has often been a subject of discussion, actual episodes of civil war characterize and articulate decisive moments of political transformation."

4 For some substantial recent work on the Social War, see, e.g., Wulff Alonso 2002; Ridley 2003; Amela Valverde 2007; Kendall 2013; Dart 2014; Sisani (forthcoming); Cappelletti – Pittia (forthcoming); for an impressive study of ancient and modern historiographical traditions and representations of the question of Italic identity and the

readily intelligible, coherent, concise, and yet comprehensive narrative analysis that seeks to capture, reconstruct, and tentatively explain all the momentous developments and events from c. 95 down to Sulla's abdication of his entirely unprecedented plenipotentiary dictatorship in January of 79.[5] Instead of being focused on furthering some central argument, this short history undertakes to join all the key dots, offering a fresh take on old problems wherever possible. Rather than overburdening the narrative with sizeable and therefore potentially disruptive digressions into (the abundant scholarship on) specific aspects, the unassuming aim is to assist a readership ranging from informed laypersons and university students at all levels to scholars of Roman history with a concise if comprehensive analysis that brings a measure of order and transparency to a series of seemingly chaotic, disjointed, and clouded events and provide them with a basic bibliography that also serves as suggested reading as well as a window into further and older scholarship on the issues at stake. Regardless of inevitable scholarly variances, the readership should nonetheless benefit from a crisp and up-to-date précis of one of the most pivotal periods in Roman history.[6]

Late in 91, in the troubled aftermath of the *lex Licinia Mucia* of 95 and the censorship of 92/91, the failure of M. Livius Drusus' visionary and encompassing reforms, his assassination in mysterious circumstances, and the ensuing outbreak of the Social War brutally shattered the relative domestic

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(aftermath of the) Social War, see Wulff Alonso 2021; for a fine sample of older scholarship on the Social War, see Cappelletti 2013: 213 n. 1. For a more exhaustive bibliography of the Social War, see esp. https://www.arcait.it/en/bibliografia/social-war/; on Marius and Sulla, see, e.g., Passerini 1971; Evans 1997; Keaveney 2005b; Santangelo 2015 and the splendid volumes edited by Schettino – Zecchini 2018, and Eckert – Thein 2020.

5 As such, this volume will to a large extent be the English language counterpart of Wulff Alonso's substantial 2002 Spanish monograph on Rome and Italy from the Social War to Sulla's retirement from active politics.

6 On the enormous significance of the era here considered, comp. also Flower 2010b: 78f.: whereas the war between Rome and her Italian allies "brought into question the whole basis of Roman power outside the city" inasmuch as the Italians now demanded "more at home" following the imperial successes of their "longstanding collaboration" with the Romans, "whether they couched their wishes in terms of demands for Roman citizenship or for a new, unified Italy not dominated by Rome", the "80s was a decade that saw an extreme military emergency in Italy (…) and a hard-won series of battles lead to the rapid collapse of republican government in the city and the establishment of a series of factional oligarchies that ended in the military dictatorship of one man, Lucius Cornelius Sulla. My argument is that we should take this violent break in Roman political life much more seriously than most previous discussions have."

calm that had followed the violent troubles that marred the waning days of C. Marius' sixth consulship in 100. Drusus' circuit-breaker reforms arguably represent a last-ditch attempt from within the heart of the ruling Roman nobility at stopping the long-boiling Roman and Italian pressure cookers from exploding.[7] Therefore, we can only acquire a meaningful grasp of his policies as well as the ensuing devastating and consequential conflict between Rome and some of its foremost Italic allies by tracing the festering socio-economic and political issues in play.

The first chapter of this short history therefore undertakes the extraordinarily fraught task of casting another light on the origins of the Social War and some of the increasingly intertwined socio-political divisions as we consider the nascent political and economic grievances of the Latin and Italian allies, as well as the growing rift between the senatorial and equestrian elite interest groups. Unsurprisingly, the relevant (carried or attempted) reforms of Ti. and C. Gracchus and M. Fulvius Flaccus (*cos*. 125) feature prominently in this survey. Against this backdrop, the second chapter revisits the multi-pronged reform program and aims of M. Livius Drusus, scion of one of the Republic's noblest senatorial houses and adoptive grandfather of the future Empress Livia Drusilla. Next follows a discussion in chapter three of the so-called Social War (91-87), including some novel appraisals of the war aims of the Italians and the (circumstances of the) piecemeal mass enfranchisements of the Latin and Italian allies from 90 down to 87. Subsequently, in chapter four the focus of the narrative shifts to the East, as we ponder the causes and outbreak of the First Mithradatic War (89-85) between Rome and the relentless king of Pontus, Mithradates VI Eupator, with particular attention to the critical years 90-88. The tremendous significance of events in Rome in 88, however, forces a return to the centre in chapter five as spiralling political rivalries and differences eventually drove the fearless and outspoken tribune of the *Plebs*, P. Sulpicius into a fateful alliance with an ageing yet ever ambitious C. Marius. With the

7 Similarly, the reforms championed by the Gracchans and Fulvius Flaccus likewise originated from within the core of the senatorial nobility. Most prominent among those who supported Tiberius' agrarian law were Tiberius' father-in-law Ap. Claudius Pulcher (*cos*. 143 and *princeps Senatus*), the consul and preeminent jurist P. Mucius Scaevola, and Scaevola's equally learned and influential natural brother, P. Licinius Crassus Mucianus (*cos*. 131 and Gaius' father-in-law): Plut. *Ti. Gracch*. 9.1 & Cic. *Acad. Pr*. 2.13. These men were "scarcely revolutionaries", to quote Stockton 1979: 39. For some useful lists of further supporters, see Brunt 1988: 463-468, and Märtin 2012: 298-300.

backing of Marius and his supporters and allies, Sulpicius pushed through a series of reforms and measures provoking the consul L. Cornelius Sulla and his army to do the unthinkable: march on Rome and subsequently force through a radical and demonstrably reactionary reform package. As an immediate corollary, chapter six zeroes in on the bloody civil war between the consuls of 87, Cn. Octavius and L. Cornelius Cinna, the former defending the recent Sullan settlement, the latter recalling the exiled C. Marius to revive Sulpicius' divisive reforms. In addition to outlining events of 87, this chapter also charts the most significant political developments and reforms occurring in the ensuing three years, 86-84, attempting to look past the tendentious smokescreen of our literary sources and establish an objective view of the important policies and measures of Cinna and his chief partisans. Chapter seven then takes us back to the East as the attention shifts to Sulla's forceful if carefully calculated and calibrated reckoning with Greece, Mithradates, and the wealthy province of Asia (87-84). The penultimate chapter paints a vivid picture of Sulla's ruthless reconquest of Italy in 83 and 82, the Republic's third ideologically driven civil war in less than a decade, an episode that amongst other things witnessed the first ever proscription in Roman history as Sulla mercilessly purged Rome and Italy of his opponents and their supporters. The ninth and final chapter scrutinizes Sulla's second reactionary revolution, this time forced through by virtue of an unparalleled plenipotentiary dictatorship of equally unprecedented duration from November 82 until January 79, when Sulla at long last laid down his office and returned to private life as the Republic's first citizen. The summary and conclusion, then, provide a brief précis of the key events, developments and arguments featured in the narrative analysis – convenient for those lacking the time or the appetite to read the full narrative – as well as some brief wider reflections on their historical significance.

Before commencing this decidedly short history of the first Roman revolutions, it is, however, important to call to mind that our capacity to study and comprehend this period and the intentions of the main protagonists and interest groups is beset with formidable obstacles. First, there is the fact that all extant coherent historiographical narratives came to us from the early imperial period, through the works of such Roman and Graeco-Roman historians as Velleius Paterculus, Plutarch, and Appian. Furthermore, some late surviving sources (esp. Eutropius and Orosius) complement what we can glean from the fragments and summaries of the lost books of Diodorus Siculus and Livy's histories, both written in the Late

Republican and Augustan era.[8] Thankfully, the prolific writings of M. Tullius Cicero (*cos*. 63) allow us to fill some of the gaps as they contain many disjointed – if at times priceless – bits and pieces of information concerning key issues or developments. Cicero's materials are further complemented by the extant commentaries of Q. Asconius Pedanius (9 BCE - 76 CE), possibly a senator himself and an acquaintance of Livy. Asconius was a learned and meticulous scholar who enjoyed direct access to a large and diverse body of now lost late republican sources.[9] Therefore, his commentaries and observations are of the utmost importance to our understanding of events. What we can piece together from the surviving literary evidence can be further enriched by some (more or less) contemporary epigraphical and numismatical materials.

The complexities of the sources are further compounded by the stark contrast between the first and second decades under consideration. Even if Cicero is adamant that "no period of our history ever produced a more numerous progeny of orators" (*Orat*. 183), the years down to 91 were of a relative if deceptive calm, in Rome, Italy and the provinces. So much so that in 1957, E. Badian noted that "the first decade of the first century B.C. is as obscure in the standard accounts as any dark age in history. Ancient historians were, on the whole, chiefly interested in bloodshed and sedition; and until its very end this decade offers little of either."[10] Indeed, Livy, after allocating some three books to the action-packed years 105-100 (67: 105-102; 68: 102-101; 69: 100) only allocates a single – if relatively long – book to 99-91 (70), followed by no less than six to the tribunate of Livius Drusus and the Social War[11] (namely 71, devoted entirely to Livius' eventful tribunate, up to and including 76), followed by four books to the internal and external events of the years 88/87 (77-80), and nine more covering the events down to 80 (81-89).

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8 For a brief discussion of – now lost – late Graeco-Roman republican historical sources (e.g. Claudius Quadrigarius, Valerius Antias, and esp. L. Cornelius Sisenna), see Santangelo 2017: 232f. On the (problems with) sources for the period late Republic, see Lintott 1992 – with respect to the years 87-83, Badian 1964: 208-215 remains useful.

9 Lewis 2006: XI-XX.

10 Badian 1957: 318.

11 As Steel 2013: 80 observes, Livy's rate of coverage of the Social War (five books) is "three times as dense as that for the second Punic war". For a detailed discussion of Livy's treatment of the Social War, Haug 1947 still offers good value.

This imbalance reflects in the derivative work of both Orosius (book 5.16-17: years 105-100; 18: 91 down to 88; 19-21: 88-80) and Eutropius, whose summary jumps directly from the Germanic War (5.1f.) to the outbreak of the Social War (5.3). Diodorus Siculus' book 36 ends (chapter 16) with a brief summary of events in 98 (the tail end of the saga of the exile of Metellus Numidicus, *cos*. 109), whereas the (fragments of) book 37 and 38/39.1-20 dwell on the origins of the Social War, Livius Drusus' fraught tribunate and the Social and civil wars down to the end of 82. Chapters 1-12 of Velleius' second book span the period from the Viriathic and Numantine wars down to the events of 100, whilst 13-29 cover events from the tribunate of Livius Drusus to events in Italy down to the end of 82. In the first book of Appian's invaluable *Civil Wars*, the narrative on the aftermath of the deadly repression of Appuleius Saturninus and his associates (33) is likewise followed closely by that on the tribunate of Livius Drusus (35). The inordinate attention to the twelve years from the tribunate of Livius Drusus to Sulla's abdication in January 79 is, however, not altogether inexcusable. This decidedly was a time of unprecedented (attempted) socio-political reforms, experimentation, and turmoil across the Roman sphere of control[12], as well as one of the most violent, volatile, and brutal episodes in Roman history, leaving indelible scars on the retina of Roman collective memory[13] and setting the stage for the staggered and definitive implosion of the Republican polity in decades following Sulla's revolutionary restoration.

The approach in this short interpretative historical analysis will be unapologetically empirical: only by relying closely – if ever critically – on the extant evidence can one achieve maximum historical authenticity. We will only indulge in cautious speculation where this cannot be avoided and in a manner that aligns best with what we can glean from those sources. Though different schools of thought will be duly flagged, the chief focus will invariably be on what historical sense can be made from the heuristic effort. The narrative will be largely diachronic as it seeks to balance respecting the chronology of events and more thematic approaches. This narrative analysis of one of the most convoluted if important periods in Roman

12 Comp. Steel 2013: 121: "The Rome which emerged in 70 BC from these transformations was (…) radically different from the Rome of 91 BC".

13 Comp. Rosenblitt 2019 (esp. Chapter 1), who defines Rome after Sulla as a "traumatized society".

history is intended as a useful resource for the field and its students. Hopefully the pundits will appraise it for what it seeks to accomplish, not for what it does not.

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ROMA

In 133 and 123/122 BCE the Gracchan reforms opened three cans of worms, pitting the Roman landowning elites against their poorer compatriots, Roman economic interests against those of the Italian allies, and senators against equestrians. As these cumulative divisions threatened to coalesce into a perfect storm, the noble and wealthy tribune of the *Plebs* M. Livius Drusus in 91 boldly proposed a comprehensive if costly New Deal. The eventual annulment of Drusus' visionary reform package set the stage for the armed rebellion of Rome's key Italic allies. Even before the conclusion of this gargantuan struggle in 87, the deep divisions Drusus and his backers had sought to resolve, compounded by political discontent among the enfranchised Italians, caused the Roman polity to descend into a series of devastating civil wars, terminated in 82/81 by Sulla's vindictive victory and reactionary new settlement. Offering a novel narrative analysis of the pivotal events of this well-known but often poorly understood period, this book seeks to demonstrate how the time from Livius Drusus' tribunate of the *Plebs* to Sulla's unparalleled dictatorship was marked by momentous reform and experimentation and suggests that the former's fateful failure arguably represents the moment the Romans lost their ancestral Republic.

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