

GREEK CULTURAL INFLUENCE AND  
THE REVOLUTIONARY POLICIES OF TIBERIUS  
GRACCHUS

*La influencia cultural griega y las políticas  
revolucionarias de Tiberio Graco*

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RESUMEN: En el presente trabajo se aborda la importancia que los referentes griegos pudieron tener en la reforma agraria de Tiberio Graco, como Diófanes de Mitileno o Blossio de Cumas, por encima de la escasa influencia de los círculos romanos.

*Palabras clave:* Tiberio Graco, Apiano, Plutarco, influencia griega, reforma agraria.

ABSTRACT: This study deals with importance that the Greek referents, such as Diophanes of Mytilene or Blossius of Cumae, may have had in the agricultural reform of Tiberius Gracchus, greater than the slight influence of Roman circles.

*Key words:* Tiberius Gracchus, Appian, Plutarch, Greek influence, agricultural reform.

The problem we shall investigate here is to what extent, if any, the influence of Greek culture had upon Tiberius Gracchus. Of especial concern are the *lex Sempronia agraria* of 133 B.C. and the illegal tactics he used to pass it. Some scholars detect a powerful Greek influence upon Tiberius' radical land reform while others minimize such influence<sup>1</sup>. The solution to this problem is of more than academic interest, for its resolution illuminates the cause of the Gracchan Revolution as well as the ensuing Roman Revolution.

It is our contention that Greek cultural influence upon the radical policies of Tiberius Gracchus was more apparent than real. The sources that attest such Greek cultural influence, Appian and Plutarch, were written in Greek and by Greeks of the Roman empire. Unwittingly these Greeks projected many Greek ideas upon the histories they wrote of Tiberius Gracchus, for neither could rise above the *zeitgeist* of his own day to explain Tiberius Gracchus within the historical context of late second century B.C. Rome.

We must caution that certainly by the second century E. C. Hellenization was happening at Rome. Captives from the wars of the Greek east, like Polybius and Panaetius, were brought to Rome and became an influence upon the Roman ruling class, especially upon Scipio Aemilianus. Some saw this Hellenization as a pernicious influence upon Roman tradition and mores. Cato the Censor at mid-second century B.C. is one such example<sup>2</sup>. Many senatorial aristocrats, by the time of Tiberius' radical tribunate, must have agreed with Cato, but there is no record that Tiberius was terribly anti-Greek. It becomes a question, therefore, of to what extent did Greek influence modify the political ideas and conduct of Tiberius Gracchus, given that there definitely was some Greek influence upon Rome at the time of Tiberius' radical tribunate in 134/3 B.C.

It is an implicit assumption of Plutarch that Tiberius Gracchus was influenced by Greek land reform of the third century B.C. In his *Parallel Lives*, for example, Plutarch compared Tiberius Gracchus to Agis of Sparta<sup>3</sup>. Land redistribution, however, had unique socioeconomic causality, not a cultural dynamic. The differences between land reform in Sparta and Gracchus' land redistribution at Rome are quite pronounced. Plutarch, himself a Greek, could not rise above seeing Rome through the distorting lens of the Greco-Roman culture of his own day. He did not understand the significance of the fact that Tiberius Gracchus was from an ancient and pedigreed Roman family and would more likely be influenced by Roman tradition than by that of the Greeks.

1. For Hellenic influence, see NICOLET, C.: «L'Inspiration de Tiberius Gracchus», *Revue des études anciennes* 67, 1968, pp. 142-159; contra, TAEGER, Fritz: *Tiberius Gracchus*, Paris, 1928, pp. 68-69.

2. For a full discussion of the influence of Cato the Censor, see ASTRO, A. E.: *Cato Censor*, Oxford, 1978, pp. 157-181.

3. The socio-economic causality and coherence of Greek land reform is presented by FUKS, Alexander: «Patterns and Types of socioeconomic Revolution in Greece from the fourth to the second century B.C.», *Ancient Society* 5, 1974, pp. 51-81.

Another example found in Plutarch's biography of Tiberius Gracchus that might suggest Greek culture influenced his land reform was that Tiberius received a Greek education from Diophanes of Mitylene. But, a Greek education by that time was common among senatorial aristocrats, and the father was ever present at such instruction so that nothing un-Roman was taught. Obviously, Plutarch made too much of the Greek education of Tiberius, which was in reality to prepare Tiberius to deal with his father's clientelae in the Greek east<sup>4</sup>.

Further evidence of Greek influence by mid-second century is found in the hypothesis of a «Scipionic Circle» among the senatorial aristocracy<sup>5</sup>. The Semproniae were connected to this circle by marriage. Tiberius' mother Cornelia was the stepsister of Scipio moreover.

Aemilianus, head of the salon. Since Tiberius Gracchus by 137 B.C. abandoned the Aemilian and joined the Claudian faction, it is unlikely a position toward Hellenization was a factor in the rivalry between these two factions. There is no evidence that Tiberius was any more philhellenic than his inimicus Scipio Aemilianus.

Another fact used to argue that Tiberius was highly influenced by Greek culture was the assertion of Plutarch that two Greeks, Diophanes of Mitylene and Blossius of Cumae «egged him on» in his agitation for land reform<sup>6</sup>. Since Tiberius' political movement attacked the senatorial establishment, the two «outsider» Greeks, Diophanes and Blossius, may have joined Mm out of a different motive than that of Tiberius Gracchus. Urging someone on does not prove Greek influence upon revolutionary land redistribution. Far more likely, Tiberius arrived at his revolutionary policies by being immersed in Roman tradition and was not inspired by the Greeks at all, an illusion of Plutarch.

Analysis of the «Scipionic Circle» to which Tiberius had connections by marriage proves it had little influence upon him and his revolutionary politics. The luminaries of this literary salon included the historian Polybius and the philosopher Panaetius. Polybius, for example, equated land reform with revolution and endorsed neither, so surely he was no influence upon the revolutionary politics of Tiberius Gracchus<sup>7</sup>. There no explicit evidence that Panaetius the Stoic, with his belief in the brotherhood of man, had any influence on the egalitarian policies of

4. For a fuller discussion with citations of ancient evidence, see BERNSTEIN, ALVIN H.: *Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus Tradition and Apostasy*, Ithaca and London, 1978: 39; cf. BADIAN, E.: *Foreign Clientelae, 264-70 B.C.* Oxford, 1958, p. 175.

5. See T. Brown, *A Study of the Scipionic Circle* (Iowa State Studies in Classical Philology, I) (Scotsdale, Penna., 1934) for a full blown study of the theory that there was a Scipionic Circle.

6. Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus* 8. Blossius, after Tiberius' death, fled to Aristonicus and joined him in his plans for kingdom in Pergamum. See DUDLEY, D. R.: «Blossius of *Journal of Roman Studies* 31, 1941, pp. 94-9 and BADIAN, E.: «Tiberius Gracchus and the Beginning of the Roman Revolution», *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Edited by Hillegart Temporini Vol. II.

7. POLYBIUS IV, 81, 1-3., but see Polybius VI, 16, 5.

Tiberius since Roman tradition itself, with its heritage of revolution and land reform, is sufficient to explain Tiberius' radical policies. There was no complex zeitgeist, including Hellenization, pushing Tiberius toward revolution.

As a matter of fact, Tiberius' populist policies were inherited from a family tradition of the Claudian gens, to which faction Tiberius came to belong. Appius Claudius Caecus in the third century B.C. formed the Claudian tradition of populism, a solicitude for the poor which Tiberius inherited<sup>8</sup>. He was the ancestor of Appius Claudius Pulcher, princeps senatus and father-in-law of Tiberius Gracchus as well as leader of the Claudian faction. Tiberius married into the Claudian faction by 137 B.C.<sup>9</sup>. All that can be concluded is that any Greek revolutionary ideological influence upon Tiberius was only a rational framework for feelings that Tiberius inherited when he defected to the Claudian faction.

In sum, the evidence for Greek influence upon Tiberius Gracchus is merely plausible, not substantial and compelling proof. It is true that in the second century B.C. Rome was undergoing Hellenization and it seems plausible to link the revolutionary land reform of Tiberius Gracchus to this cultural revolution. The Greeklike picture we get of Tiberius Gracchus stems suspiciously from sources written in Greek during the period of the Roman empire. Surely these Greeks, Appian and Plutarch, exaggerated the Greekness of Tiberius' policies since they both saw things through Greek eyes of their own time. Rather, the elevated and noble social background of Tiberius suggests he most likely did things with the Roman political and moral tradition in mind.

This Roman revolutionary tradition, taught to every young senatorial aristocrat, was born at the very inception of the Republic in 509 B.C. It was a band of aristocrats who deposed the last Roman king and proclaimed an aristocratic Republic. This revolutionary tradition included the Conflict of the Orders where the plebeians demanded more rights. This movement went into remission from 264-133 B.C., and then was revived in a different form by Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. Tiberius started a social movement once again that ended the old Republic by 31 B.C., with

8. See SYME, Romald: *The Roman Revolution*, Oxford, 1939, p. 19 for family factional politics; cf. Badian, *Tiberius Gracchus*, 668-731.

9. There is dispute over the date of Tiberius' marriage to the daughter of Appius Claudius Pulcher, significant because it would be the date that he abandoned the Aemilian for the Claudian faction. For the date of 137 B.C., see Valerius Maximus IX, 7, 2; Gellius 11, 3, 5; Scholiast Bobbiensis 8 Strg.; Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus* 4.

That Tiberius was married before 147 B.C., see Cicero *Brutus* 100, de re publica 1, 31, pro Scauro 32; Plutarch *Apotheosis Scipionis* 9-10, *Aemilius Paullus* 38, 2. For the date 143 B.C., see EARL, D. C.: *Tiberius Gracchus: A Study in Politics*, Brussels, 1962, pp. 67-70. Friedrich Münzer, *Römische Adelspartien und Adelfamilien*, Stuttgart, 1920, pp. 26-27. Tiberius came of age in 143 B.C. and Bernstein, 56 judges that in that year he was married. Tiberius got into trouble over the foedus Mancinum in 137 B.C., the most likely date he left the Aemilian faction. That incident showed he was out of favor with Scipio Aemilianus. He sealed his new relationship with the Claudian faction by marrying its leader's daughter.

the liquidation of the oligarchy by Antony and Octavian. It makes more sense to understand Tiberius and his revolutionary policies in terms of his own tradition rather than look to some foreign culture as a cause of it. Besides, Gracchan land reform was part of the tide of democratic trend of the second century B.C.<sup>10</sup>.

This democratic movement went back to the Conflict of the Orders, and even Plutarch linked the *lex Sempronia agraria* of 133 B.C. to the earlier Licinio-Sextian laws of 367 B.C. Tiberius was seen by Plutarch as reactivating this previous law during his radical tribunate of 134/3 B.C.<sup>11</sup>. The fourth century B.C. law limited the amount of land a citizen could hold in «*possessio*» of «the public land of the Roman people». It was overseas imperialism commercial in nature, that the ruling class started in order in part to distract the poor from their plight. While land redistribution in Sparta toward the end of the third century B.C. may have been some small inspiration to Tiberius, the real impetus stemmed from the Conflict of the Orders which Tiberius modified into class struggle that included violence.

Evidence of Greek cultural influence, moreover, is found in Tiberius' purported speeches preserved in the pro-Gracchan tradition exemplified by Appian and Plutarch. These speeches contain Greek ideas like radical democracy, unknown to the Romans. Abstract logic is often used to explain political issues where the typical Roman politician would argue from precedent and tradition. The difficulties with the evidence of the extant speeches is compounded when we learn that they are «his very words»<sup>12</sup>. Many of the ideas put in the mouth of Tiberius Gracchus by the Greek historians Appian and Plutarch reflect more the ideas of the historians themselves than any ideas Tiberius may have had. For example, the moral attitude found in the extant speeches is stoic in origin, traceable to Panaetius<sup>13</sup>. Greek idea of the sovereignty of the people or majority rule is also found in the speeches of Tiberius and is quite revolutionary since it ignored the traditional Roman ethos of an elite of high birth and noble lineage. This radical democracy was foreign to Romans who practiced unit voting based upon wealth and where sovereignty rested both with «the Senate and Roman people». It is difficult to believe that Tiberius, scion of an old and distinguished Roman family of blueblooded aristocrats could ever have succumbed to such radical Greek ideas. He may, however, have paid lipservice to such ideas for political reasons. It is more likely these ideas were those of Appian and Plutarch which they themselves

10. For a full discussion, see, for example, ROSS TAYLOR, Lily: «Forerunners of the Gracchi», *The Journal of Roman Studies* 52, 1962, pp. 19-28.

11. Ancient testimonia for the Licinio-Sextian Rogations include: Livy VI, 35, 5; 42, 9-14; XXXIV 4, 9; Valerius *Res Rustica* 1, 2, 9; Pliny *Historia Naturales* LVIII, 17; Valerius Maximus VIII, 6, 3; Columella de *Res Rustica* 1, 3, 11; Velleius 11, 6, 3; Plutarch *Camillus* 39, 5, *Tiberius Gracchus* 8; Gellius VI, 3, 37, XXI, 28; 11. Appian *Bella Civilia*, 1, 8-9; Aurelius *vir illustris*, 20, 3-4.

12. STOCKTON, David: *Gracchi*, Oxford, 1979, pp. 69 with ancient citations.

13. See BECKER, James: «The influence of Roman Stoicism upon Gracchan economic land reform». *La parola del passato*, 19, 1964, pp. 125-134.

projected upon the tribune. The so-called democratic way Tiberius tried to pass his *lex Sempronia agraria* of 133 B.C. was not really that democratic, for the *concilium plebis* did not contain the majority of citizens at any one time. Sometimes even *peregrina* were present and voted illegally.

Another example of the so-called Greek influence is the deposing of the hostile tribune Octavius who was intervening with his veto to block passage of the *lex Sempronia agraria* of 133 B.C.<sup>14</sup>

Tiberius' argument that a tribune had to defend the interests of the plebeians or else he could be recalled by a vote of the plebeians is most un-Roman. In fact, Roman tradition long tolerated tribunes who did the bidding of the Senate, as Octavius was evidently doing. Malfeasance for a tribune could be prosecuted as soon as he left office and became a private citizen. This idea of the instantaneous sovereignty of the Roman people was much more Greek than Roman. While Tiberius probably did depose the tribune Octavius, it is unlikely he used the sophisticated Greek arguments attributed to him by Plutarch.

Another distortion of the pro-Gracchan tradition, especially Appian, was that *stasis*, a Greek concept, not traditional Roman *sedition* and *tumultus*, was started by Tiberius Gracchus. This trend of poor pitted against rich, ruled against ruler, class warfare, persisted until the end of the Republic by 31 B.C. The Latin concepts of *sedition* and *tumultus* are less definite explanations than *stasis* and simply imply a disturbance against the state. The riot that resulted in Tiberius' death was more a disturbance against the state than class warfare. Clearly, therefore, Appian exaggerated Tiberius' pitting poor against rich; he appealed in his policies to all outside the *ordo senatorius*. Later, his brother Gaius Gracchus in 123 B.C. even appealed to the commercial class of knights. The type class war that Tiberius started was not simple *stasis* but *sedition*, a coalition of classes antagonistic to the state. Besides, Cicero, in a position to know late second century B.C. history, had a different view of what happened<sup>15</sup>. Any class war was contrived and incited by Tiberius; it was not natural.

The very nature of Roman politics disproves any argument that Tiberius was motivated by «leftist» Greek political ideology. In the first century B.C., for example, Cicero's brother wrote him a handbook on Roman politics when Cicero was running for Consul. The handbook stressed personal, not ideological, ways of winning votes. Romans were practical, not philosophical. Political groupings and rivalry were based on blood and marriage relationships as well as friendship. The goal was to advance the political group or faction by winning the magistracies so as to be in a position to command patronage<sup>16</sup>. Political appeals were made to

14. PLUTARCH: *Tiberius Gracchus*, 1, 11.

15. BERNSTEIN, See: 242-8 with ancient citations.

16. MÜNZER: 5.

certain groups as *clientelae* for whom, as a *quid pro quo*, the patron would furnish *beneficia*. Ideology played no real role in Roman politics.

Thus, Tiberius' *lex Sempronia agraria* of 133 B.C. was a patronage bill, not an idealistic piece of «social» legislation. Plots of the public land were given to allottees in return for *beneficia*. The histories written in Greek, especially Appian and Plutarch, saw too much statesmanship and design in what Tiberius did. Tiberius' program was demagogic. Allotments of land under his bill were precarious and insecure, and recipients would be beholden to Tiberius for this benefit. It would thus be easy to twist *beneficia* out of such *clientelae*. The land reform was more visceral than cerebral.