



Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus

Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, son of the consul of the same name in 177 and 163, and Cornelia, daughter of Scipio Africanus, was elected tribune of the plebs in 133 BC. Despite coming from a noble family, Gracchus tried to limit the power of the large landowners and return public lands to poorer citizens. During his mandate he proposed the approval of an agrarian law (*lex agraria*) according to which the parts of *ager publicus* in private possession exceeding 500 iugeri (750 for those who had one child, 1000 for those who had two or more) were claimed by the State (which was the owner) and redistributed in lots to poor citizens. This proposal,



revolutionary for that time aroused the strong opposition of the Senate, whose members feared the loss of their privileges. The latter thus used the other tribune of the Plebs, Octavius, to veto the discussion of the proposal. Tiberius, after having tried in vain to come to an agreement, proposed to the tribune assemblies (the people gathered in assembly) the dismissal of his colleague, an event that had never happened in the past, accusing him of abusing his office. Ottavio was dismissed, the agrarian law was voted. However, due to the opposition of the aristocracy, it was not possible to carry it out and, therefore, to redistribute the land (the senators claimed that after a long time they could no longer distinguish the land that belonged to the state from that which was actually theirs). At the end of his mandate (the office of Tribune of the Plebs, by law, lasted one year) Tiberius, who was afraid that all his work would be lost, decided to stand for election as Tribune of the Plebs for the following year as well, something unthinkable for the politics of the time. The Senators, in fact, accused him that he wanted to establish



a tyrannical regime and stirred up the people against him. During the elections on Capitol Hill, Tiberius received false information that his enemies had a plan to kill the consul Mucius Scaevola. Panic began to spread in the assembly, so Tiberius' supporters took up their spears to defend themselves. Tiberius' enemies ran to the Senate and denounced the fact, accusing him of wanting to be a king. The pontifex maximus, Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica Serapione, cousin on Tiberius' maternal side, assembled with the other senators their followers at the temple of Fides, exhorted them to enforce the law in a summary manner, that is, through the formula of *tumultus*, after which they all went armed to the steps of the temple of

after which they all went armed to the steps of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus where Tiberius and his followers had gathered. A carnage ensued in which more than three hundred Roman citizens lost their lives and among them Tiberius himself, killed with clubs, perhaps at the hands of Nasica himself or Publius Satureius, another senator.

His body was thrown into the Tevere river and his supporters were sentenced to death or exiled without trial.

The murder of Tiberius Gracchus was one of the first episodes of political violence in the history of Republican Rome and marked a point of no return for Roman politics. It was the first time that an internal conflict was resolved with the assassination of a tribune, a figure that had been considered sacred and inviolable until then. His death revealed deep social tensions, due to the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few and the growing poverty of the plebs. After his death, the Senate attempted to limit his reforms, but the idea of land redistribution had become a central theme. Tiberius' younger brother, Gaius Gracchus, resumed his battles ten years later, attempt to carry out new social and political reforms. Gaius, however, also met a violent end, testifying to how the struggles for social rights and equality were now inseparable from political violence.



The murder of the Gracchi brothers contributed to accelerating the crisis of the Roman Republic. The use of violence as a political mean became increasingly common, leading to a period of civil wars (Marius and Sulla, Caesar and Pompey) which, about a century later, would lead to the fall of the Republic and the rise of the Empire under Octavianus Augustus.

Sources:

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1. Treccani Storica/National Geographic
2. Wikipedia

