

Information on Gaius Gracchus

Biographical Briefing

Gaius Gracchus (pronounced GY-uss GRAH-kuss) was born in 153 B.C.E., into a well-to-do plebeian family. Like his older brother, Tiberius Gracchus, Gaius received a traditional Greek education—including the study of philosophy, mathematics, and the Greek language—and distinguished himself in military service. Gaius was a flamboyant person, and a passionate and skilled speaker. After his brother was murdered in 133 B.C.E., he took up his brother's cause of helping the poor. Committed to political reform, he proved to be an even stronger opponent to the wealthy than his brother Tiberius Gracchus had been.

Gaius was elected a leader of the people's Assembly, called a *tribune*, in 124 B.C.E., and was reelected the following year. As tribune, he passed programs that benefited many different groups in Roman society—except the Senate. For example, he supported a measure that divided state lands from conquests into smaller holdings and redistributed them to the lower classes. Another law he passed created corn allowances—or *subsidies*—for the poor living in the city. Under the law, the government provided produce and money for food to guarantee that these people would not starve. Gaius also developed programs that built better roads and harbors, thus helping the business community. Finally, he reformed the system for taxing the provinces and administering the law. Each of these actions weakened the power of the Senate. Although Gaius became popular with many citizens, most senators hated and feared him. Therefore, when Gaius ran for a third term as tribune in 121 B.C.E., the Senate supported its own candidate. Gaius lost the election, and his enemies in the Senate went after him. A mob of soldiers and citizens attacked Gaius and his supporters, claiming they threatened the stability of the state. Recognizing that resistance was hopeless, Gaius ordered his personal slave to kill him.



- Which political cause did Gaius take up after his brother was murdered?
- What types of programs did Gaius pass as tribune?
- What happened to Gaius after he ran for a third term as tribune?

Position: Gaius believed that expansion hurt Rome because it increased the number of poor people living in Rome.

Main Points on Roman Expansion

Rome's military expansion caused the forced movement—or *displacement*—of many small farmers. After years of conquests, the only people who could afford to operate farms in the Roman Republic were wealthy landowners. The small farmers who lost their property left the land and drifted toward the cities—particularly Rome. This created severely overcrowded conditions. By 133 B.C.E., Rome had a population of more than 500,000 people. This huge increase in population led to a severe housing shortage. Whole families crowded together in small rooms in badly constructed apartment buildings. Apartment owners simply added floors to their buildings without proper reinforcements to take advantage of the housing shortage. These poorly supported buildings often collapsed, killing many inhabitants.

Overpopulation was made even worse by unemployment. Most citizens who arrived in Rome needed jobs. However, Rome did not have many factories, and slaves held the few available jobs. Many desperate unemployed citizens had to sell their votes in the Assembly to rich politicians just to get money to support themselves.

Without work, many poor Romans were dependent on the government, which had to spend more money providing for them. Food was a particular problem. The price of corn—the food upon which the poor relied—varied wildly, depending upon whether supplies arrived from Africa or Sicily. To help solve the problem, the government sold corn at one half the average cost, but only to city residents. This encouraged even more poor people to move from the country to the already overpopulated city, which caused more unemployment. As a result, violent crime increased dramatically. With no police force, only wealthy people who could afford bodyguards went out at night. To prevent the poor from completely rebelling, the government also spent more money on entertainment for the people. Officials paid for grand festivals with gladiators, games, and food—and these expensive events further strained the Roman treasury.



- Why did Roman military expansion create more poor people?
- What conditions did the poor and unemployed who lived in Rome face?
- What policies did the Roman government institute to help the poor?