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# FROM REPUBLIC TO EMPIRE

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HOW REVOLUTIONARY WERE THE  
MILITARY REFORMS OF GAIUS MARIUS?

*“To one who aspires to power the poorest man is the most helpful, since he has no regard for his property, having none and considers anything is honourable for which he receives pay.”<sup>1</sup>*

THE ANCIENT SOURCES SEE THE POLITICAL SITUATION in the second century BC as becoming ever more factionalised, with politicians becoming either Optimates or Populares.<sup>2</sup> However, it is easy to over-emphasise these differences, the two groups were most unlike modern political parties, differing more in their methods than their ideologies. Links between them were probably stronger than would at first appear, though Silverman’s (1996) comment that “every popularis after Tiberius Gracchus should be suspected of less than sincere motives” does seem somewhat uncharitable. One character who does appear to fly in the face of conventional Roman politics, however, is Gaius Marius. In contrast to the Gracchus brothers, Marius was a self-made man with no aristocratic background. He came from humble origins and made a spectacular career for himself through the Roman army.

The Roman legionary army had traditionally been recruited and arranged on a strictly timocratic paradigm whereby only those citizens with a certain property qualification were eligible for conscription. Since at least the time of the Second Punic War, this structure had been organised according to the Servian Constitution. This scheme served to provide some measure of differentiation amongst the army and divided the men into five classes based on wealth. Classes I – III provided the heavily armed infantry, whilst those in classes IV – V made up the light infantry. Entry to the lowest class (class V) was based on a minimum census qualification of 11,000 asses, though changes were later made to this. The class structure also had important consequences on the battlefield, for the citizen-soldiers (*adsidui*) were expected to provide their own equipment:

*“the common soldiers wear ... a breastplate of brass a span square, which they place in front of the heart and call the heart-protector (pectorale), thus completing their accoutrements; but those who are rated above ten thousand drachmas wear instead of this a coat of chain-mail (lorica).”<sup>3</sup>*

Though here Polybius seems to be referring only to class I of the heavy infantry suggesting that perhaps by this time it was only they who wore any form of differentiation in their dress.

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<sup>1</sup> Sallust. *Jugurthine War*, I.LXXXVI, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* XLI – XLII.

<sup>3</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, VI, 23, 15.

Traditionally, the army drew its numbers from the rural citizen body. However, changing economic circumstances caused partly by the devastation of the Hannibalic War, and partly by the increased wealth flooding in from the newly acquired provinces, posed the very real danger that many of the peasant farmers could become destitute, thus sinking below the minimum property qualification. They would become *capitecensi* or *proletari* and not, therefore, subject to conscription.

Hannibal had destroyed many farms and those surviving faced competition from cheaper produce which was now available in the provinces. Many peasants did not have the skill or resources to switch to other forms of production, and whilst the level of competition was not sufficient in itself to make viable farms untenable, it did prevent the restoration of many of the farms destroyed by Hannibal.

New conquests overseas meant that the army was necessarily stationed away from home for longer and longer periods, and whilst the richer owners could afford to pay for their properties to be taken care of, many of the borderline peasant farmers would return from their exploits to find their homesteads ruined. Plutarch recants the concerns of Tiberius Gracchus in this respect:

*“The wild beasts that roam over Italy ... have every one of them a cave or lair to lurk in; but the men who fight and die for Italy enjoy the common air and light, indeed, but nothing else; houseless and homeless they wander about with their wives and children. And it is with lying lips that their imperators exhort the soldiers in their battles to defend sepulchres and shrines from the enemy; for not a man of these has an hereditary altar, not one of all these many Romans an ancestral tomb, but they fight and die to support others in wealth and luxury, and though they are styled masters of the world, they have not a single clod of earth that is their own.”<sup>4</sup>*

Furthermore the increase in wealth coming in from the new territories served to fragment society, increasing the divisions between rich and poor. The misuse of *ager publicus* by wealthy landowners led to the creation of larger estates (*latifundia*) swallowing up the smaller patchwork of farmsteads. These *latifundia* looked to the burgeoning slave market for their workers, further dispossessing free agricultural labourers who migrated to the city to join the urban unemployed.

It is probably this general increase in poverty which caused the reduction in the number of citizen-soldiers able to arm themselves, for these *adsidui* now became armed at the State's expense with a deduction being made from their *stipendium* to cover any additional costs:

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<sup>4</sup> Plutarch, *Lives*, 'Tiberius Gracchus', 9.

*“the quaestor deducts from their pay the price fixed for their corn and clothes and any additional arm they require.”<sup>5</sup>*

The recurrent theme throughout the second century BC relates to this problem of the increased proletarianization of the *adsidui*. Reductions in the minimum census qualification had been made during times of particular crisis c.214 BC (to 4,000 asses) and c.129 BC (to 1,500 asses), to improve recruitment into the army by including the *proletarii*. However, these reductions were expedient measures which failed to address the root cause of Italy’s financially polarised society.

All of this could be, and was, ignored so long as the Roman army was successful, but the fighting force was now in a steady decline – the early stages of the III Punic War had been disastrous. Standards of conduct had been deteriorating throughout the second century with harsh conditions in Spain making men reluctant to serve there. Cases of mutiny and insubordination are reported as far back as 190 BC (Scullard, 1982, 14). Corruption by generals in search of war-booty was rife and there were increasing difficulties in raising the levy, ultimately leading to the arrest of one of the consuls in 151 BC.

However, it was the land issue which was to become dominant and in 146 BC with the end of both the III Punic and the IV Macedonian Wars, large numbers of men were ‘demobbed’ with nowhere to go. The land reforms of Tiberius Gracchus must be seen as a genuine and in some respects successful attempt to resolve this issue, particularly when buoyed-up by the unexpected inheritance of the kingdom of Attalus III. Many small farmers were set up and in that respect the unemployment problem was alleviated. However, by the 120s much of the *ager publicus* had already been distributed forcing Gaius Gracchus to set up colonies in southern Italy. Despite this temporary relief from the recruitment problem, the army continued to suffer defeats, notably at Noricum (113 BC) and in Gaul (109 & 107 BC), leading to heavy losses of men and it is in this context that we should see Marius’s reforms.

The chief feature of these reforms was clearly the enrolment of the *proletarii* and *capitecensi*, effectively severing ties with the timocratic principle and laying the foundations for a professional army. However his other reforms are equally important and point to his skill as a general and tactician. Changes were made to fighting formations with all the infantry now being armed alike. His restructuring of the army into cohorts, although practised previously, was regularised to form the basic unit of the legion. He was also particularly astute in developing a ‘regimental’ loyalty amongst the legions by providing a legionary eagle to act as a figurehead and rallying point for the troops. This one act clearly demonstrates his skill at command and remained a feature of legionary

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<sup>5</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*. vi, 39, 15.

armies throughout the empire, perhaps being best exemplified during Cæsar's attack on Britain when the eagle-bearer of the 10th legion rallied the troops and "*began to bear the eagle against the enemy.*"<sup>6</sup> The training of Marius's soldiers is also a key feature in his reforms, with the men now being drilled along gladiatorial lines. They became better equipped with standardised equipment (no doubt drawing on Marius's personal copper-mines in Spain), and changes to the design of their throwing spears meant that the enemy could no longer re-use them. Expecting the soldiers to carry at least some of their own equipment also reduced the army's dependency on its baggage train. The contemporary description of the men as 'Marius's Mules' was no doubt an apposite one!

However, it is his enlistment of the lower orders which has attracted the most attention. To what extent this was a revolutionary act, however, is doubtful. The *proletarii* had been enrolled on a frequent basis in the past, such as at Trasimene and Cannæ and it seems that it was for solidly military reasons, principally to further the war with Jugurtha, that this step was taken. These reasons must have been almost universally accepted, since almost no contemporary criticism was raised (Gabba 1977, 14). Indeed he does not initially appear to have enrolled huge numbers, for he left for Africa with only "*a considerably greater contingent than had been authorised.*"<sup>7</sup> – the *proletarii* did not become fully integrated into the army until well after the shocking defeat at Arausio (105 BC).

Much debate has centred on Marius's personal motives for extending the levy. Sallust holds that his motives were *per ambitionem consulis*,<sup>8</sup> though it should be noted that he is portraying the anti-Marian viewpoint. Gabba (1977, 14), sees the changes as being merely the final stages in a process which had been ongoing for more than a century, though it must also be added that this action would have won Marius considerable popular support, allowing the urban plebs, who were opposed to military service to avoid the levy, and here, perhaps, Sallust's charges are justified. The enrolment of the *proletarii* would also have had significance in terms of the Patron/Client relationship. The transfer of *proletarii* from the patronage of the Senate to that of Marius would be clearly seen as an anti-*nobilis* standpoint. To some extent, however, it is impossible when analysing his motives, to escape from our knowledge of later events. Marius's actions clearly did lay the foundations for a professional army owing all to their leader, a state of affairs which under another general, would lead to the downfall of the Republic. However, can a man whose actions enable a revolution be termed a revolutionary? In purely contemporary terms it is difficult to see Marius's actions as anything other than innovative rather than revolutionary.

Perhaps the only opportunity we have to determine his motives is by examining his character. In his early career, Marius appears to be a man acutely aware of his humble origins, but rather than

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<sup>6</sup> Cæsar. *Galic Wars*. IV, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Sallust. *Jugurthine War*. LXXXVI, 4

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

attempting to challenge the authority of the Senate, he seems bent on achieving an influential position within it. His winning of the patronage of the Metelli and his marriage into the Julians do not appear to be the acts of a revolutionary – at least not in the modern sense. As a *novus homo* he would have faced an uphill struggle to become accepted by the Senate. Despite his glorious military career, his political one seems to have been a combination of ineptitude and bloody-mindedness. The decision to use Saturninus as his advocate, a man who at best has been described as unscrupulous and hot-headed, would appear to have been politically naïve, to say the least. Given Marius's lust for baiting the Optimates, one wonders whether the Senate was merely being expedient in allowing his continued consulship whilst Italy faced the threat of invasion from the north. The *Senatus Consultum Optimum* of 100 BC forcing Marius to destroy Saturninus must have enjoined certain feelings of *schadenfreude* amongst the *nobiles*.

However, it is at this stage that we get possibly the best clue as to whether or not Marius and hence his reforms were, in fact, revolutionary. Following Saturninus's destruction, Marius's army was in Rome; he could have used it to get anything he wanted. No one dared stand against him and he could have brought down the Republic and established himself as a tyrant. At the height of his *auctoritas* had he wished, he could have achieved a great measure of social reform, but there is little to suggest that his mind ever turned to such matters. Instead he went to the east, where yet another war was offering.

That Marius did not move against the Senate says much about his nature. He was no revolutionary. In truth, Gaius Marius wanted the one thing he would never have: he wanted acceptance. He wanted to be part of the ruling class. It is the ultimate irony that the path he took dreadfully undermined the ruling class and the very balance of power within Roman politics.

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