SOME RECENT BOOKS


Why another book about the Gracchi? Mr Stockton tells us in the Acknowledgements that this is largely a summary of previous works. The excellent brief account of Roman terms and institutions, placed rather strangely in the Foreword, suggests that this new book should be comprehensible to those students for whom Roman history begins in 133 B.C.

Until now students have been served by extracts from the ancient sources, either in the original or in translation, together with a selection of the views of writers from Mommsen onwards. Many monographs are also available, especially on Tiberius Gracchus. Mr Stockton has done something different. He has given us in one book a critical appraisal of the ancient sources, a comprehensive survey of modern opinions and finally his own choice as to the most likely account.

This entails many pages of closely reasoned argument, some of which is of necessity incorporated in the text. The more contentious issues are dealt with in footnotes, which also provide extracts from the sources in the original languages. Some of these footnotes become almost essays in their own right, because Mr Stockton is meticulous in giving every point of view. This does become cumbersome, but still seems the best method in topics where there are more questions than answers. The book can be read satisfactorily at two levels.

The topics which are fundamental for understanding the Gracchan period are included in the text. Among these are the identity of the *equites* at that time, the different types of citizenship and the status of the Italian allies, voting procedure and what it meant in practical terms, and concepts such as *mos maiorum* and the *senatus consultum ultimum*. These summaries are of great value, being written in a way which is both scholarly and readable.

Three topics of greater complexity or specialist interest are relegated to the Appendices. These are:

1. An account of *ager publicus populi Romani* and the significance of *possessio*, giving a précis of much of Tibiletti’s work.
2. An exhaustive list, including extracts of one or two words, of the surviving speeches of Gaius Gracchus.
3. The chronology of Gaius’ laws, so far as this can reasonably be conjectured.

The Introduction, subtitled ‘The Nature of the Evidence’, deals with the crucial matter of the sources, as well as giving an overview of the whole topic. Valuable insight is given here, as well as in Appendix 3, into the aims
and priorities of Appian and Plutarch. But if this book is meant for beginners, they need to be given approximate dates for these writers, as also for the elder Cato in Chapter I.

Chapter I, 'Politics and the Land', addresses the question of how much we can discover about agriculture in Italy in the second century B.C. Some scholars postulate a greater drift to Rome than Mr Stockton does, quoting the building of the Aqua Marcia, for example, as an indication of greatly increased population. J.M. Frayn’s recent work, 'Subsistence Farming in Roman Italy', suggests, however, that the overall picture of Italian agriculture was not as clearly defined as either ancient writers or modern commentators suggest. She shows that smallholders lived on many sources of food other than grain, and off a much smaller acreage than has been thought possible. Like the scattered termini of the land commissioners, the traces of small mixed farms, continuously existing in areas supposedly taken over by large estates, are still few in number. But they should make us look carefully at our preconceptions. Mr Stockton’s footnote (p.22) hardly does justice to this aspect.

As for Tiberius Gracchus, his actions and motives have provided a fertile field for theorists from Cicero onwards. We can only weigh up the differing accounts, add any facts we can glean from other sources, then decide on the most likely interpretation. In general the ancient accounts of Tiberius' modus operandi, of his reaction to opposition of various kinds, leave me with a rather different impression from, for example, what Mr Stockton sees as 'the obvious explanation' (p.61) for Tiberius' taking his agrarian bill straight to the concilium plebis.

I think that the author also fails to reconcile Appian’s insistence on helping the Italian race with the professed motive of εὔανδρία—if this is taken to mean primarily the provision of soldiers for the legions. The suggestion that some of the large gaps in the lex agraria of 111 might have contained provisions for granting allotments to non-Romans leaves the question wide open.

The end of Chapter IV in particular gives a good summing up and a survey of Tiberius seen as a member of his family and his class, and acting in a manner appropriate to both. There are many salutary comments throughout. The author warns against picturing the Roman nobility as divided into rigid factiones, against looking for any single motive for Tiberius' actions, against seeing specious parallels with modern situations. He dispels the myth of pre-Gracchan Rome as a unified society. The character of Tiberius Gracchus will continue to fascinate us, but let us heed Mr Stockton’s words—'cool reason does not always explain men’s actions'.

For Gaius Gracchus Mr Stockton states clearly how little firm evidence there is. Both Appian and Plutarch, he concludes, 'got into a muddle' on various points. While this seems the only way out of many dilemmas, it can
lead to arbitrary decisions on smaller points. To give one example, I can see no reason for assuming that Appian has mistranslated or misunderstood his Latin source (p.98) when he says that the Senate despised Gaius for coming back from Sardinia with his money-bags empty.

For most of the problems it is a matter of deciding which of several conflicting sources to accept, and why. Mr Stockton does not shirk this task. A good example is his discussion on the *lex de repetundis* (p.138ff.). How was the *quaestio* constituted, and was it only one of several set up under a general *lex iudicaria*? In sixteen pages the author gives us all the evidence and arguments and a compromise solution. Some will feel that this depends on too many conjectures, but as it is made quite clear what are the known facts and what are only reasonable assumptions, the student can make up his own mind.

The thorniest of all the problems are posed in Appendix 3, on the chronology of Gaius’ measures. Given the fact that neither Appian, in his very compressed account, nor Plutarch, seems concerned about the order of events, but rather about categories and motives and effects, it seems unprofitable to scrutinise their texts for clues about dates. It is easy to read a wealth of meaning into a single word, e.g. into the tense of *ἐνημαρχεῖ* in Appian *B.C.* 1.22.1 (pp.227-8). Arguments about chronology based on the Tabula Bembina are also inconclusive, but the pros and cons are recorded with scrupulous fairness.

With such meagre and contradictory evidence, the historian’s conjectures must be based on the picture he forms of the sort of man that Gaius was and the results he was trying to achieve. Certainly, if the sequence of Gaius’ laws were recoverable it would tell us a great deal about his tactics. But even without any sure knowledge of this, we can still appreciate his dynamic energy and breadth of vision, which Mr Stockton amply illustrates.

To conclude, this book deals with the complexities of its period as lucidly as seems possible at present. The only other way is a gross oversimplification. While not everyone may agree with Mr Stockton’s conclusions, all the evidence is presented for other points of view. Some of the most valuable parts of the book are, I think, incidental to its main theme. I refer to the many general observations about evidence and the nature of historical research, and much sound advice to would-be theorists; and to the various summaries, which clarify vital issues for students.

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