

Notes on Quiz #4: Optimates and Populares

1. Why did Tiberius Gracchus's land bill provoke conflict? Consider both the content and the way it was passed.

The Gracchan laws affected the Italian public lands (*ager publicus*)—vast amounts of lands taken by Rome in war. These lands had been settled by citizens in small freeholds still technically owned by the state but farmed by generations of Roman citizen farmers. But the shifting of the rural economy in the third and second centuries meant that more and more of this land was ending up as part of the large estates of the rich. Tiberius Gracchus's law proposed enforcing an old law saying no one could have more than 300 acres; he hoped to redistribute the land to recreate a large population of citizen farmers out of the landless poor teeming in Rome. This was taken by the rich as a rabble-rousing attack on behalf of the poor.

Gracchus also bypassed the senate and proposed his law directly to the people. Over time it had become customary to present laws first to the senate, which would debate them and offer a resolution supporting it if they approved. Since the conservative senate contained many rich landholders and their friends, and were moreover averse to radical change that would upset customs and traditions of the Republic (which they felt duty-bound to protect), Gracchus knew his law would be opposed by the senate. But bypassing the senate angered the elite, and since Gracchus broke no laws in doing so the response to Gracchus was personal and outside of the system.

Gracchus also had the Assembly vote to remove a tribune who had threatened to veto the bill if it passed, and funded the land commission created by the law by diverting the bequest of the king of Pergamum, scorning the senate's traditional control over foreign policy. In bypassing the senate, acting against a (pro-senate) tribune, and diverting the Pergamene bequest, Gracchus asserted a more extreme idea of the power of the People (without reference to the state) than most in the ruling class could withstand.

2. How did Mithridates's uprising in the east impact on political affairs in Rome?

His massacre of Romans and Italians in Asia province forced Rome to go to war actively against him, after years of little action against Mithridates's casual expansionism in Anatolia. This led to a Roman effort to take direct control in a region Rome had been leaving partly to itself, which was part of what moved Rome toward taking a greater and more assertive role in controlling the east.

At home, the need for war against Mithridates was seized as an opportunity by the supporters of Marius, who got the command against Mithridates taken away from the pro-senate consul, Sulla. In the riot that followed, Sulla restored order by marching on Rome with his army, establishing a terrible precedent of generals using the army against the Roman state.

EC1. Important populists (populares) included all of the following EXCEPT

- ✓ (a) L. Cornelius Sulla [Sulla was a leader of the pro-senate factions, the optimates]
- (b) C. Marius
- (c) Ti. Sempronius Gracchus
- (d) L. Cornelius Cinna

EC2. What was the senate's "ultimate decree" (*senatus consultum ultimum*)? How was it used during this period?

The *senatus consultum ultimum*, or "ultimate decree," was a Senate vote to instruct the consul and other top magistrates to defend the Republic and see that no harm came to the state. It enabled the state to use violence against Roman citizens, depriving them of *provocatio* (a citizen's right of appeal to the People) and other protections.

It could be wielded by a faction in the Senate (in this case the most conservative of the "optimates"). It was used to justify killing C. Gracchus and thousands of his supporters.