

BOOK REVIEW

Crisis Management During the Roman Republic. The Role of Political Institutions in Emergencies. By GREGORY K. GOLDEN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xvii + 245. Hardcover, \$ 95.00. ISBN 978-1-107-03285-9.

The Roman Republic went through its share of crises during its five-century existence and exhibited a large and varied number of responses to these situations. In this book, Golden analyzes the main mechanisms of the Republic to deal with the crises that posed existential threats to the Roman state and its governing system. By doing so, he sheds new light on a question that has occupied scholars for centuries: why did the Roman Republic fall?

The first chapter presents modern political science definitions of *crisis*. The word is often used by ancient scholars for all kinds of political and military problems faced by the Roman state. Golden defines a crisis as an immediate problem that threatened the continued existence of the Roman state and had to be solved within a certain time period; this excludes more long-term problems from the discussion.

Rome's earliest institutional response to a crisis was the appointment of a *dictator*, one man who was given the overall command of the situation. This mechanism was used repeatedly in the early Republic, both against external threats and to counter internal unrest. However, from the early 3rd century on the office was resorted to less often, until the Hannibalic War necessitated the appointment of a *dictator*.

The dictatorship had been tied from the early Republic to two other mechanisms, the declaration of a *tumultus* and/or a *iustitium*. These methods continued to be used even when the dictatorship itself was avoided. In chapter 3, Golden discusses the *tumultus*: this mechanism enacted an emergency military draft, often executed by the commander on the run rather than in Rome. The *tumultus* included older or unfit men; exemptions (*vacationes*) were not honored. The soldiers were discharged when the emergency was over, instead of at the end of the campaign season. Golden spends some time trying to establish when *tumultus* was declared during the Republic, against external or internal enemies, but in many cases the evidence is not strong. Chapter 4 focuses on the *iustitium*, which

was often decreed together with the *tumultus*; this was a complete suspension of all public and private business, including the closure of law courts and shops. Again, the sources do not always tell us clearly when this was proclaimed.

In 121 BC a new mechanism for confronting crises was created: the *senatus consultum ultimum*, discussed in chapters 5 and 6. This, as Golden points out, was similar to a dictatorship, in that it put power in the hands of the executive power, i.e. the magistrates, giving them authority to tackle the crisis. However, as Cicero experienced, it did not stop the normal legal process; after the crisis magistrates could be taken to account for their actions. It could be passed together with a *tumultus* or *iustitium*, but this was not always the case.

Golden recounts the instances of the passing of the *SCU*; as he rightly argues, the *SCU* did not give the magistrates any powers that they did not already hold, so that passing the *SCU* was done especially as a public statement that a crisis existed. In fact, it could be argued (although Golden does not make the point) that declarations of a *tumultus* and *iustitium* were also propaganda statements, used to make people aware of the seriousness of the crisis, since the individual crisis measures could be enacted without the declaration. Therefore, whether such a measure was officially decreed or not may not in fact have mattered very much, perhaps explaining why the sources are not always clear on this point.

Golden then discusses crises resolved by other means, e.g. diplomacy, Senatorial decrees, assigning a consul or other commander to face an external threat, having the magistrates assign specific tasks to specific people, or simply violence. This shows again the thin line running between official declarations of *tumultus*, *iustitia*, or *SCUs*, and 'non-official' ways to solve a crisis, which were usually available. However, there were crises which could not be solved, namely when competing power structures, such as the consuls, the tribunes of the plebs, and the Senate, were at odds with each other.

Golden concludes by providing various important insights on the nature of crisis resolution in the Republic. The main weakness of the Roman Republic was that it did not have a final arbiter whose authority would be respected by all parties in a dispute. In the early Republic, the dictatorship, however, was exactly that: a single man in power, creating unified executive authority. From the early 3rd century the Senate asserted itself as the main decision-making body and became more reluctant to appoint one man to absolute power. The *SCU* was insufficient, since it did not give the magistrates absolute power; in the long term, it only helped to legitimize violent solutions to political conflict. Yet, this meant that

there was no way to get out of a political impasse, since no impartial institution existed to end conflicts. Ultimately, the only way this problem could be solved was by creating a final authority: the Emperor. However,—although Golden does not acknowledge this—even his power depended on the people's (especially the army's) goodwill, as had the authority of Republican magistrates.

In short, this work presents important new insights on the workings of politics in the Roman Republic, and successfully identifies one of its main weaknesses, namely the lack of an ultimate arbiter. This brings us much closer to explaining the fall of the Republic, not a mean feat. As such the book is essential reading for all those interested in the Republic, and in fact scholars of the Principate as well, since despite the presence of the emperors as supreme rulers, not all constitutional problems could be solved.

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