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THE PARADOXICAL REPUBLIC

Ancestral Voices

In the beginning, before the Republic, Rome was ruled by kings. About one of these, a haughty tyrant by the name of Tarquin, an eerie tale was told. Once, in his palace, an old woman came calling on him. In her arms she carried nine books. When she offered these to Tarquin he laughed in her face, so fabulous was the price she was demanding. The old woman, making no attempt to bargain, turned and left without a word. She burned three of the books and then, reappearing before the king, offered him the remaining volumes, still at the same price as before. A second time, although with less self-assurance now, the king refused, and a second time the old woman turned and left. By now Tarquin had grown nervous of what he might be turning down, and so when the mysterious crone reappeared, this time holding only three books, he hurriedly bought them, even though he had to pay the price originally demanded for all nine. Taking her money, the old woman then vanished, never to be seen again.

Who had she been? Her books proved to contain prophecies of such potency that the Romans soon realized that only one woman could possibly have been their author—the Sibyl. Yet this was an identification that only begged further questions, for the legends told of the Sibyl were strange and puzzling. On the presumption that she had foretold the Trojan War, men debated whether she was a compound of ten prophetesses, or immortal, or destined to live a thousand years. Some—the more sophisticated—even wondered whether she existed at all. In fact, only two things could be asserted with any real confidence—that her books, inscribed with spidery and antique Greek, certainly existed, and that within them could be read the pattern of events that were to come. The Romans, thanks to Tarquin's belated eye for a bargain, found themselves with a window to the future of the world.

Not that this helped Tarquin much. In 509 BC he succumbed to a palace coup. Kings had been ruling in Rome for more than two hundred years, ever since the city's foundation, but Tarquin, the seventh in line, would also be the last.* With his expulsion, the monarchy itself was overthrown, and, in its place, a free republic proclaimed. From then on, the title of "king" would be regarded by the Roman people with an almost pathological hatred, to be shrunk from and shuddered at whenever mentioned. Liberty had been the watchword of the coup against Tarquin, and liberty, the liberty of a city that had no master, was now consecrated as the birthright and measure of every citizen. To preserve

it from the ambitions of future would-be tyrants, the founders of the Republic settled upon a remarkable formula. Carefully, they divided the powers of the exiled Tarquin between two magistrates, both elected, neither permitted to serve for longer than a year. These were the consuls,† and their presence at the head of their fellow citizens, the one guarding against the ambitions of the other, was a stirring expression of the Republic's guiding principle—that never again should one man be permitted to rule supreme in Rome. Yet, startling though the innovation of the consulship appeared, it was not so radical as to separate the Romans entirely from their past. The monarchy might have been abolished, but very little else. The roots of the new Republic reached far back in time—often very far back indeed. The consuls themselves, as a privilege of their office, bordered their togas with the purple of kings. When they consulted the auspices they did so according to rites that predated the very foundation of Rome. And then, of course, most fabulous of all, there were the books left behind by the exiled Tarquin, the three mysterious rolls of prophecy, the writings of the ancient and quite possibly timeless Sibyl.

So sensitive was the information provided by these that access to them was strictly regulated as a secret of the state. Citizens found copying them would be sewn into a sack and dropped into the sea. Only in the most perilous of circumstances, when fearsome prodigies warned the Republic of looming catastrophe, was it permitted to consult the books at all. Then, once every

alternative had been exhausted, specially appointed magistrates would be mandated to climb to the temple of Jupiter, where the books were kept in conditions of the tightest security. The scrolls would be spread out. Fingers would trace the faded lines of Greek. Prophecies would be deciphered, and advice taken on how best to appease the angered heavens.

And advice was always found. The Romans, being a people as practical as they were devout, had no patience with fatalism. They were interested in knowing the future only because they believed that it could then better be kept at bay. Showers of blood, chasms spitting fire, mice eating gold: terrifying prodigies such as these were regarded as the equivalent of bailiffs' duns, warnings to the Roman people that they stood in arrears with the gods. To get back in credit might require the introduction of a foreign cult to the city, the worship of a divinity who had hitherto been unknown. More typically, it would inspire retrenchment, as the magistrates desperately sought to identify the traditions that might have been neglected. Restore the past, the way that things had always been, and the safety of the Republic would be assured.

This was a presumption buried deep in the soul of every Roman. In the century that followed its establishment, the Republic was repeatedly racked by further social convulsions, by demands from the mass of citizens for expanded civic rights, and by continued constitutional reforms—and yet throughout this turbulent period of upheaval, the Roman people never

ceased to affect a stern distaste for change. Novelty, to the citizens of the Republic, had sinister connotations. Pragmatic as they were, they might accept innovation if it were dressed up as the will of the gods or an ancient custom, but never for its own sake. Conservative and flexible in equal measure, the Romans kept what worked, adapted what had failed, and preserved as sacred lumber what had become redundant. The Republic was both a building site and a junkyard. Rome's future was constructed amid the jumble of her past.

The Romans themselves, far from seeing this as a paradox, took it for granted. How else were they to invest in their city save by holding true to the customs of their ancestors? Foreign analysts, who tended to regard the Romans' piety as "superstition,"[1] and interpreted it as a subterfuge played on the masses by a cynical ruling class, misread its essence. The Republic was not like other states. While the cities of the Greeks were regularly shattered by civil wars and revolutions, Rome proved herself impervious to such disasters. Not once, despite all the social upheavals of the Republic's first century of existence, had the blood of her own citizens been spilled on her streets. How typical of the Greeks to reduce the ideal of shared citizenship to sophistry! To a Roman, nothing was more sacred or cherished. After all, it was what defined him. Public business—*res publica*—was what "republic" meant. Only by seeing himself reflected in the gaze of his fellows could a Roman truly know himself a man.

And by hearing his name on every tongue. The good citizen, in the Republic, was the citizen acknowledged to be good. The Romans recognized no difference between moral excellence and reputation, having the same word, *honestas*, for both. The approval of the entire city was the ultimate, the only, test of worth. This was why, whenever resentful citizens took to the streets, it would be to demand access to yet more honors and glory. Civil unrest would invariably inspire the establishment of a new magistracy: the aedileship and tribunate in 494, the quaestorship in 447, the praetorship in 367. The more posts there were, the greater the range of responsibilities; the greater the range of responsibilities, the broader the opportunities for achievement and approbation. Praise was what every citizen most desired—just as public shame was his ultimate dread. Not laws but the consciousness of always being watched was what prevented a Roman's sense of competition from degenerating into selfish ambition. Gruelling and implacable though the contest to excel invariably was, there could be no place in it for ill-disciplined vainglory. To place personal honor above the interests of the entire community was the behavior of a barbarian—or worse yet, a king.

In their relations with their fellows, then, the citizens of the Republic were schooled to temper their competitive instincts for the common good. In their relations with other states, however, no such inhibitions cramped them. "More than any other nation, the Romans have sought out glory and been greedy

for praise."[2] The consequences for their neighbors of this hunger for honor were invariably devastating. The legions' combination of efficiency and ruthlessness was something for which few opponents found themselves prepared. When the Romans were compelled by defiance to take a city by storm, it was their practice to slaughter every living creature they found. Rubble left behind by the legionaries could always be distinguished by the way in which severed dogs' heads or the dismembered limbs of cattle would lie strewn among the human corpses.[3] The Romans killed to inspire terror, not in a savage frenzy but as the disciplined components of a fighting machine. The courage they brought to service in the legions, steeled by pride in their city and faith in her destiny, was an emotion that every citizen was brought up to share. Something uniquely lethal—and, to the Romans, glorious—marked their way of war.

Even so, it took time for the other states of Italy to wake up to the nature of the predator in their midst. For the first century of the Republic's existence the Romans found it a struggle to establish their supremacy over cities barely ten miles from their own gates. Yet even the deadliest carnivore must have its infancy, and the Romans, as they raided cattle and skirmished with petty hill tribes, were developing the instincts required to dominate and kill. By the 360s BC they had established their city as the mistress of central Italy. In the following decades they marched north and south, crushing opposition wherever they met it. By the 260s, with startling speed, they had mastered the entire

peninsula. Honor, of course, had demanded nothing less. To states that humbly acknowledged their superiority, the Romans would grant such favors as a patron condescends to grant his clients, but to those who defied them, only ceaseless combat. No Roman could tolerate the prospect of his city losing face. Rather than endure it, he would put up with any amount of suffering, go to any lengths.

The time soon came when the Republic had to demonstrate this in a literal struggle to the death. The wars with Carthage were the most terrible it ever fought. A city of Semitic settlers on the North African coast, dominating the trade routes of the western Mediterranean, Carthage possessed resources at least as great as Rome's. Although predominantly a maritime power, she had indulged herself for centuries with bouts of warfare against the Greek cities of Sicily. Now, poised beyond the Straits of Messina, the Romans represented an ominous but intriguing new factor in Sicily's military equation. Predictably, the Greeks on the island could not resist embroiling the Republic in their perennial squabbles with Carthage. Equally predictably, once invited in, the Republic refused to play by the rules. In 264 Rome transformed what had been a minor dispute over treaty rights into a total war. Despite a lack of any naval tradition, and the loss of fleet after fleet to enemy action or storms, the Romans endured over two decades of appalling casualties to bring Carthage, at last, to defeat. By the terms of the peace treaty forced on them, the Carthaginians undertook a complete

withdrawal from Sicily. Without ever having intended it, Rome found herself with the nucleus of an overseas empire. In 227 Sicily was constituted as the first Roman province.

The theater of the Republic's campaigning was soon to grow even wider. Carthage had been defeated, but not smashed. With Sicily lost, she next turned her imperial attentions to Spain. Braving the murderous tribes who swarmed everywhere in the mountains, the Carthaginians began to prospect for precious metals. The flood of wealth from their mines soon enabled them to contemplate resuming hostilities. Carthage's best generals were no longer under any illusions as to the nature of the enemy they faced in the Republic. Total war would have to be met in kind, and victory would be impossible unless Roman power were utterly destroyed.

It was to achieve this that Hannibal, in 218, led a Carthaginian army from Spain, through southern Gaul and over the Alps. Displaying a mastery of strategy and tactics far beyond that of his opponents, he brought three Roman armies to sensational defeat. In the third of his victories, at Cannae, Hannibal wiped out eight legions, the worst military disaster in the Republic's history. By every convention and expectation of contemporary warfare, Rome should have followed it by acknowledging Hannibal's triumph, and attempting to sue for peace. But in the face of catastrophe, she showed only continued defiance. Naturally, at such a moment, the Romans turned for guidance to the prophecies of the Sibyl. These prescribed that two Gauls and two Greeks

be buried alive in the city's marketplace. The magistrates duly followed the Sibyl's advice. With this shocking act of barbarism, the Roman people demonstrated that there was nothing they would not countenance to preserve their city's freedom. The only alternative to liberty—as it had always been—was death.

And grimly, year by year, the Republic hauled itself back from the brink. More armies were raised; Sicily was held; the legions conquered Carthage's empire in Spain. A decade and a half after Cannae Hannibal faced another Roman army, but this time on African soil. He was defeated. Carthage no longer had the manpower to continue the struggle, and when her conqueror's terms were delivered, Hannibal advised his compatriots to accept them. Unlike the Republic after Cannae, he preferred not to risk his city's obliteration. Despite this, the Romans never forgot that in Hannibal, in the scale of his exertions, in the scope of his ambition, they had met the enemy who was most like themselves. Centuries later statues of him were still to be found standing in Rome. And even after they had reduced Carthage to an impotent rump, confiscating her provinces, her fleet, her celebrated war-elephants, the Romans continued to dread a Carthaginian recovery. Such hatred was the greatest compliment they could pay a foreign state. Carthage could not be trusted in her submission. The Romans looked into their own souls and attributed the implacability they found there to their greatest foe.

Never again would they tolerate the existence of a power capable of threatening their own survival. Rather

than risk that, they felt themselves perfectly justified in launching a preemptive strike against any opponent who appeared to be growing too uppity. Such opponents were easy—all too easy—to find. Already, even before the war with Hannibal, the Republic had fallen into the habit of dispatching the occasional expedition to the Balkans, where its magistrates could indulge themselves by bullying princelings and redrawing boundaries. As the Italians would have confirmed, the Romans had an inveterate fondness for this kind of weight-throwing, reflecting as it did the familiar determination of the Republic never to brook disrespect. For the treacherous and compulsively quarrelsome states of Greece, however, it was a lesson that took some grasping. Their confusion was understandable—in the early years of their encounters with Rome, the Republic did not behave at all in the manner of a conventional imperial power. Like lightning from a clear sky, the legions would strike with devastating impact, and then, just as abruptly, be gone. For all the fury of these irregular interventions, they would be punctuated by lengthy periods when Rome appeared to have lost interest in Greek affairs altogether. Even when she did intervene, her incursions across the Adriatic continued to be represented as peace-keeping ventures. These still had as their object not the annexation of territory but the clear establishment of the Republic's prestige, and the slapping down of any overweening local power.

In the early years of Roman engagement in the Balkans, this had effectively meant Macedon. A kingdom to the

north of Greece, Macedon had dominated the peninsula for two hundred years. As heir to the throne of Alexander the Great, the country's king had always taken it for granted that he could be quite as overweening as he pleased. Despite repeated punishing encounters with the armies of the Republic, such an assumption never entirely died, and in 168 BC Roman patience finally snapped. Abolishing the monarchy altogether, Rome first of all carved Macedon into four puppet republics, and then in 148, completing the transformation from peace-keeper to occupying power, established direct rule. As in Italy, where roads criss-crossed the landscape like the filaments of a net, engineering prowess set the final seal on what military conquest had begun. The via Egnatia, a mighty gash of stone and gravel, was driven through the wilds of the Balkans. Running from the Adriatic to the Aegean Sea, this highway became the vital link in the coffle joining Greece to Rome. It also provided ready access to horizons even more exotic, those beyond the blue of the Aegean Sea, where cities glittering with gold and marble, rich with works of art and decadent cooking practices, seemed positively to invite the Republic's stern attentions. Already, in 190, a Roman army had swept into Asia, pulverized the war machine of the local despot, and humiliated him before the gaze of the entire Near East. Both Syria and Egypt, the two local superpowers, hurriedly swallowed their pride, learned to tolerate the meddling of Roman ambassadors, and grovelingly acknowledged the Republic's hegemony. Rome's formal empire was still

limited, being largely confined to Macedon, Sicily, and parts of Spain, but her reach by the 140s BC extended to strange lands of which few back in Rome had even heard. The scale and speed of her rise to power was something so startling that no one, least of all the Romans themselves, could quite believe that it had happened.

And if they thrilled to their country's achievements, then so too did many citizens feel unease. Moralists, doing what Roman moralists had always done and comparing the present unfavorably with the past, did not have to look far for evidence of the pernicious effects of empire. Ancient standards appeared corrupted by the influx of gold. With plunder came foreign practices and philosophies. The unloading of Eastern treasures into Rome's public places or the babbling of strange tongues on her streets provoked alarm as well as pride. Never did the hardy peasant values that had won the Romans their empire seem more admirable than when they were being most flagrantly ignored. "The Republic is founded on its ancient customs and its manpower"[4] —so it had been triumphantly asserted in the afterglow of the war against Hannibal. But what if these building blocks began to crumble? Surely the Republic would totter and fall? The dizzying transformation of their city, from backwater to superpower, disoriented the Romans and left them nervous of the jealousy of the gods. By an uncomfortable paradox, their engagement with the world came to seem the measure of both their success and their decline.

For great as Rome had become, portents were not lacking of her possible doom. Monstrous abortions, ominous flights of birds: wonders such as these continued to unsettle the Roman people and require, if the prodigies appeared particularly menacing, consultation of the Sibyl's prophetic books. As ever, prescriptions were duly discovered, remedies applied. The Romans' time-sanctioned ways, the customs of their ancestors, were resurrected or reaffirmed. Catastrophe was staved off. The Republic was preserved.

But still the world quickened and mutated, and the Republic with it. Some marks of crisis defied all powers of ancient ritual to heal them. Changes such as the Roman people had set in motion were not easily slowed down—not even by the recommendations of the Sibyl.

It required no portents to illustrate this, only a walk through the world's new capital.

All was not well in the seething streets of Rome.

The Capital of the World

A city—a free city—was where a man could be most fully a man. The Romans took this for granted. To have *civitas*—citizenship—was to be civilized, an assumption still embedded in English to this day. Life was worthless without those frameworks that only an independent city could provide. A citizen defined himself by the fellowship of others, in shared joys and sorrows, ambitions and fears, festivals, elections, and disciplines of war. Like a shrine alive with the presence of a god, the