being punished as an exemplary case for a public act of disobedience, even though it had been on a relatively trivial scale? Or was there a real suspicion that it could become an alternative power base in the eastern Mediterranean? Or, as Polybius insinuates at the end of his *Histories*, were the Romans starting to resort to extermination for its own sake?

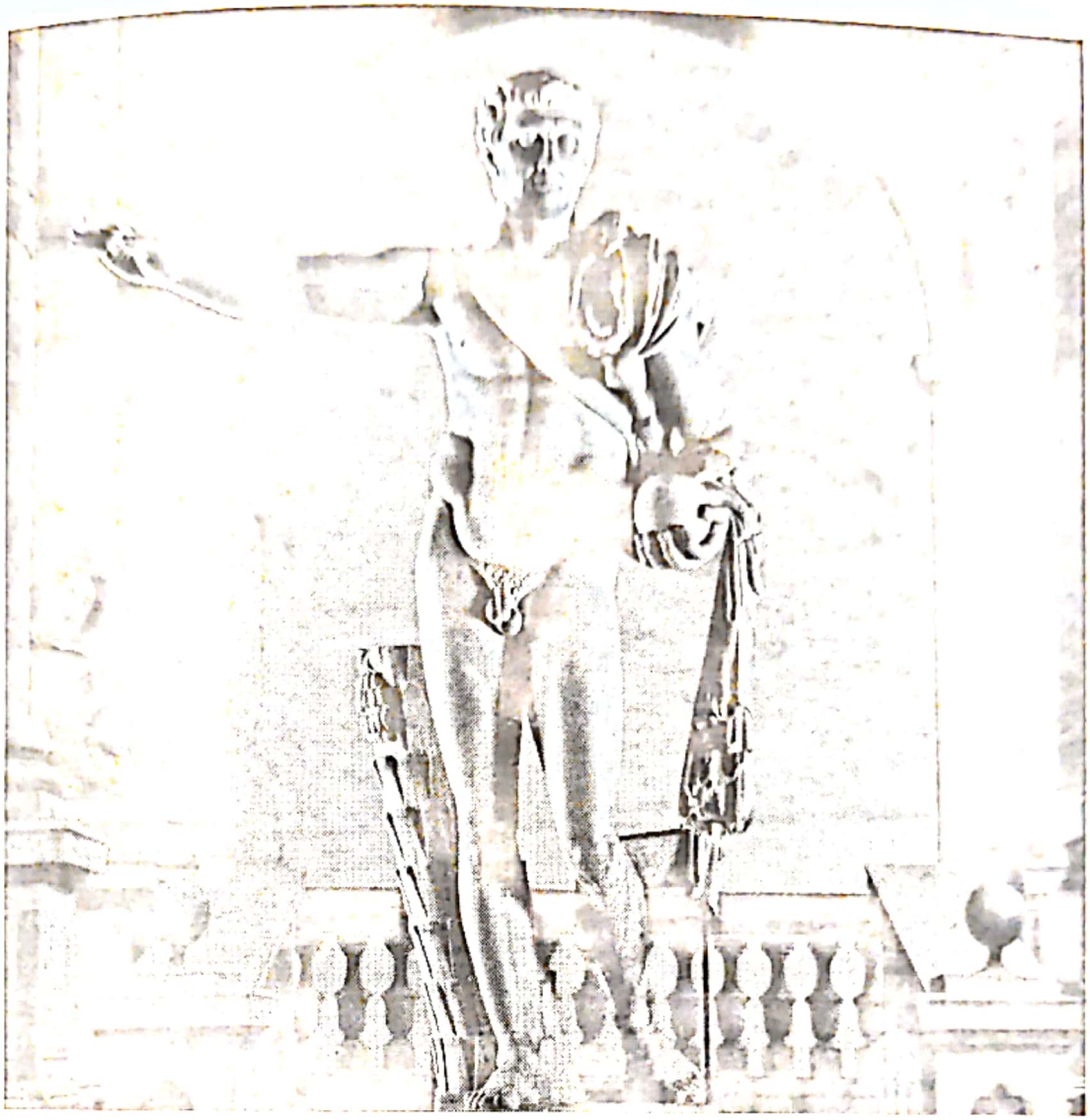
Whatever motivations lay behind the violence of 146 BCE, the events of that year were soon seen as a turning point. In one way, they marked the acme of Roman military success. Rome had now annihilated its richest, oldest and most powerful rivals in the Mediterranean world. As Virgil presented it more than a hundred years later in the *Aeneid*, Mummius, by conquering Corinth, had at last avenged the defeat of Aeneas' Trojans by the Greeks in the Trojan War. But in another way, the events of 146 BCE were seen as the beginning of the collapse of the Republic and as the herald of a century of civil wars, mass murder and assassinations that led to the return of autocratic rule. Fear of the enemy, so this argument went, had been good for Rome; without any significant external threat, 'the path of virtue was abandoned for that of corruption'. Sallust was particularly eloquent on the theme. In his other surviving essay, on a war against the North African king Jugurtha at the end of the second century BCE, he reflects on the dire consequences of the destruction of Carthage: from the greed of all sections of Roman society ('every man for himself'), through the breakdown of consensus between rich and poor, to the concentration of power in the hands of a very few men. These all pointed to the end of the Republican system. Sallust was an acute observer of Roman power, but the collapse of the Republic was, as we shall see, not quite so easily explained.

The legacy of Romulus and Remus?

The period between 146 BCE and the assassination of Julius Caesar

in 44 BCE, particularly its last thirty years, marked a high point of Roman literature, art and culture. The poet Catullus was writing what still ranks as some of the world's most memorable love poetry, addressed to a Roman senator's wife whose identity he, no doubt wisely, concealed under the pseudonym 'Lesbia'. Cicero was drafting the speeches that have been some of the touchstones of oratory ever since and was theorising principles of rhetoric, good government and even theology. Julius Caesar was composing an elegantly self-serving description of his campaigns in Gaul, one of the rare accounts by a general – or anyone else, for that matter – of his own military operations to survive from the ancient world. And the city of Rome was on the verge of transforming from an unplanned rabbit warren into the impressive capital that we now have in our minds. The first permanent stone theatre opened in 55 BCE, with a stage 95 metres wide, attached to a vast new complex of promenades, sculpture gardens and porticoes supported on marble columns (see Fig. 44). Now buried underground near the modern Campo de' Fiori, it once covered an area significantly larger than the later Colosseum.

Yet many Roman commentators focused on no such glittering achievements but on progressive political and moral decline. Roman armies still won very lucrative, and sometimes very bloody, victories abroad. In 61 BCE, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus – 'Pompey the Great', as he styled himself, in imitation of Alexander – celebrated a triumph for his victory over King Mithradates VI of Pontus, who once occupied extensive territories around the Black Sea coast and had his eye on more. This was an even more spectacular occasion than the triumph of Aemilius Paullus a century before. The '75,100,000 drachmae of silver coin' carried in the procession was the equivalent of the entire annual tax revenue of the empire. It would have been enough to feed two million people for a year, and a good part of it went towards building that first, ostentatious, theatre. In the 50s BCE, the campaigns in Gaul, to the north, which were commanded and written up by Caesar, brought



35. A colossal statue, now in the Palazzo Spada in Rome, usually identified as a portrait of Pompey; the globe in the hand reflects a common symbol of Pompey as world conqueror. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was a particularly celebrated work and was even wrongly believed to be the very statue of Pompey at whose feet Julius Caesar was assassinated. Some blemishes on the marble were optimistically identified as the traces of Caesar's blood.

several million people under Roman control, not counting the million or so whom he is believed to have left dead in the process. Increasingly, however, Roman weapons were turned not against foreign enemies but against Romans themselves. Never mind any thoughts of Aeneas' Trojans; this was the legacy of Romulus and Remus, the fratricidal

twins. The 'blood of innocent Remus', as Horace put it in the 30s BCE, was taking its revenge.

Looking back over the period, Roman historians regretted the gradual destruction of peaceful politics. Violence was increasingly taken for granted as a political tool. Traditional restraints and conventions broke down, one by one, until swords, clubs and rioting more or less replaced the ballot box. At the same time, to follow Sallust, a very few individuals of enormous power, wealth and military backing came to dominate the state – until Julius Caesar was officially made 'dictator for life' and then within weeks was assassinated in the name of liberty. When the story is stripped down to its barest and brutal essentials, it consists of a series of key moments and conflicts that led to the dissolution of the free state, a sequence of tipping points that marked the stages in the progressive degeneration of the political process, and a succession of atrocities that lingered in the Roman imagination for centuries.

The first was in 133 BCE, when Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, a tribune of the people with radical plans to distribute land to the Roman poor, decided to seek a second year in office. To put a stop to this, an unofficial posse of senators and their hangers-on interrupted the elections, bludgeoned Gracchus and hundreds of his supporters to death and threw their bodies into the Tiber. Conveniently forgetting the violence that had accompanied the Conflict of the Orders, many Romans held this to be 'the first political dispute since the fall of the monarchy to be settled by bloodshed and the death of citizens'. There was soon another. Just over a decade later, Tiberius Gracchus' brother Gaius met the same fate. He had introduced an even more radical programme of reform, including a subsidised grain allowance for Roman citizens, and was successfully elected tribune for a second time. But in 121 BCE, when he was trying to prevent his legislation from being dismantled, he became the victim of another, more official, posse of senators. On this occasion the bodies of thousands of his supporters

clogged the river. And it happened again in 100 BCE, when other reformers were battered to death in the senate house itself, the assailants using tiles from the building's roof as their weapons.

Three more sustained civil wars, or revolutionary uprisings (there is often a hazy boundary between them), followed in quick succession and in a sense added up to an on-and-off single conflict lasting more than twenty years. First, war was declared on Rome in 91 BCE by a coalition of Italian allies, or *socii* (hence the quaint, and deceptively harmonious, modern title of Social War). Within a couple of years the Romans more or less defeated the allies, and in the process gave most of them full Roman citizenship. Even so, the death toll – among men who had once served side by side in Rome's wars of expansion – was, according to one Roman estimate, around 300,000. Exaggerated as that figure may be, it still points to casualties on a scale not far from that of the war against Hannibal. Before the Social War was over, one of its commanders, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, a consul in 88 BCE, became the first Roman since the mythical Coriolanus to lead his army against the city of Rome. Sulla was forcing the hand of the senate to give him command in a war in the East, and when he returned from that victorious four years later, he marched on his home town once again and had himself appointed dictator. Before resigning in 79 BCE, he introduced a wholesale conservative reform programme and presided over a reign of terror and the first organised purge of political enemies in Roman history. In these 'proscriptions' (that is, 'notices', as they were known, in a chilling euphemism), the names of thousands of men, including about a third of all senators, were posted throughout Italy, a generous price on their heads for anyone cruel, greedy or desperate enough to kill them. Finally, the fallout from both these conflicts fuelled Spartacus' famous slave 'war', which began in 73 BCE and remains one of the most glamorised conflicts in the whole of Roman history. Brave as they were, this handful of breakaway slave-gladiators must have been reinforced by many of the disaffected Roman citizens in Italy; they

could hardly otherwise have stood up to the legions for almost two years. This was a combination of slave rebellion and civil war.

By the 60s BCE, political order in Rome itself was repeatedly breaking down, replaced by street violence that became part of daily life. Catiline's 'conspiracy' was only one such incident among many. There were any number of occasions when rioting prevented elections from taking place, or when massive bribery was supposed to have swayed the decision of the electorate or of juries in the courts, or when murder was the weapon of choice against a political opponent. Publius Clodius Pulcher, the brother of Catullus' 'Lesbia' and the man who engineered Cicero's exile in 58 BCE, was later killed by a gang of paramilitary slaves owned by one of Cicero's friends in a seedy brawl in a city suburb ('the Battle of Bovillae', as it was grandly, and ironically, known). Where exactly the responsibility for his death lay was never clear, but he was given an impromptu cremation in the senate house, which burned down with him. By comparison, one controversial consul in 59 BCE got off lightly: he was merely pelted with excrement and spent the rest of his year of office barricaded at home.

Against this background, three men – Pompey, Julius Caesar and Marcus Licinius Crassus – made an informal deal to use their combined influence, connections and money to fix the political process in their own interests. This 'Gang of Three', or 'Three-Headed Monster', as one contemporary satirist put it, for the first time effectively took public decisions into private hands. Through a series of behind-the-scenes arrangements, bribes and threats, they ensured that consulships and military commands went where they chose and that key decisions went their way. This arrangement lasted for about a decade, starting around 60 BCE (private deals are hard to date precisely). But then, seeking to secure his personal position, Julius Caesar decided to follow the precedent of Sulla and take over Rome by force.

The essentials of what happened next are clear, even if the details are almost impenetrably complicated. Leaving Gaul in early 49 BCE,

Caesar famously crossed the river Rubicon, which formed the boundary of Italy, and marched towards Rome. Forty years had made a big difference. When Sulla turned his army on the city, all but one of his senior officers had refused to follow him. When Caesar did the same, all but one stayed with him. It was an apt symbol of how far scruples had eroded in such a short time. The civil war that followed, in which Caesar and Pompey, the one-time allies, were now the rival commanders, spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Rome's internal conflicts were no longer restricted to Italy. The decisive battle was fought in central Greece, and Pompey ended up murdered on the coast of Egypt, beheaded by some Egyptian double-dealers he had imagined were his allies.

This is a powerful story of political crisis and bloody disintegration, even told in its most skeletal form. Some of the underlying problems are obvious. The relatively small-scale political institutions of Rome, little changed since the fourth century BCE, were hardly up to governing the peninsula of Italy. They were even less capable of controlling and policing a vast empire. As we shall see, Rome relied more and more on the efforts and talents of individuals whose power, profits and rivalries threatened the very principles on which the Republic was based. And there was no backstop – not even a basic police force – to prevent political conflict from spilling over into murderous political violence in a huge metropolis of a million people by the mid first century BCE, where hunger, exploitation and gross disparities of wealth were additional catalysts to protests, riots and crime.

It is also a story that historians, both ancient and modern, tell with all the advantages and disadvantages of hindsight. Once the outcome is known, it is easy to present the period as a series of irrevocable and brutal steps in the direction of crisis or as a slow countdown to both the end of the free state and the return of one-man rule. But the last century of the Republic was more than a mere bloodbath. As the flowering of poetry, theory and art suggests, it was also a period when

Romans grappled with the issues that were undermining their political process and came up with some of their greatest inventions, including the radical principle that the state had some responsibility for ensuring that its citizens had enough to eat. For the first time, they confronted the question of how an empire should be administered and governed, rather than simply acquired, and devised elaborate codes of practice for Roman rule. In other words, this was also an extraordinary period of political analysis and innovation. Roman senators did not sit idly by as their political institutions lapsed into chaos, nor did they simply fan the flames of the crisis to their own short-term advantage (though there was certainly a bit of that). Many of them, from different ends of the political spectrum, tried to find some effective remedies. We should not allow *our* hindsight, *their* ultimate failure or the succession of civil wars and assassinations to blind us to their efforts, which are the main theme of this and the next chapter.

We shall look harder at some of the most famous conflicts and characters of the period to ask what exactly the Romans were arguing or fighting about. Some of the answers will take us back to the popular manifesto of liberty embedded in the accounts and reconstructions of the Conflict of the Orders. But there are new issues too, from the effect of the mass grant of full citizenship to the Italian allies to the question of how the profits of the empire should be shared. These themes are all inextricably intertwined: the success (or failure) of armies serving overseas had direct consequences on the home front; the political ambitions of men like Pompey and Caesar lay behind some of the wars of conquest; there was never any clear divide between the military and political roles of the Roman elite. Nevertheless, in the interests of a clear account of these crucial but complicated developments, Chapter 7 focuses on Rome abroad and on the rise of the overpowering dynasts, especially Pompey and Caesar, in the later part of the period. For now, we will concentrate mainly on questions to do with Rome and Italy and with the earlier part of the period, roughly – to

put it in terms of some of the famous names that still dominate the narrative – from Tiberius Gracchus to Sulla and Spartacus.

Tiberius Gracchus

In 137 BCE Tiberius Gracchus – a grandson of Scipio Africanus, a brother-in-law of Aemilianus, and a war hero at the siege of Carthage, where he had been the first to scale the enemy wall – was travelling north from Rome to join the legions in Spain. As he rode through Etruria, he was shocked at the state of the countryside, for the land was being worked and the flocks tended by foreign slaves on industrial-scale estates; the small, peasant farmers, the traditional backbone of Italian agriculture, had disappeared. According to a pamphlet written by his younger brother Gaius, quoted in a much later biography, this was the moment when Tiberius first became committed to reform. As he later put it to the Roman people, many of the men who fought Rome's wars 'are called masters of the world but have not a patch of earth to call their own'. To him, that was not fair.

How far the smallholders really had disappeared from the land has puzzled modern historians much more than it did their ancient counterparts. It is not difficult to see how an agricultural revolution of that kind might have been a logical consequence of Roman warfare and expansion. During the war against Hannibal, at the end of the third century BCE, rival armies had tramped up and down the Italian peninsula for a couple of decades, with devastating effects on the farmland. The demands of service with the army overseas removed manpower from the agricultural workforce for years on end, leaving family farms without essential labour. Both of these factors could have made smallholders particularly vulnerable to failure, bankruptcy or buy-outs by the rich, who used the wealth they acquired from overseas conquest to build up vast land holdings, worked as agricultural ranches by the