

Assessment highlights 2021

Ancient History

Internal assessment 3

Investigation — historical essay based on research

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Assessment overview

Context

In this unit, students investigated the relationship between people, power and authority in the Ancient World. The chosen topic was Topic 5: Rome — Civil War and the breakdown of the Republic, with specific focus on key individuals and groups and their role in undermining the values and constitution of the Republic.

The syllabus conditions require a student response of between 1500 and 2000 words in the format of a historical essay based on research.

Task

Students were asked to investigate a key individual or group who contributed to the breakdown of the Roman Republic, and apply key issues identified during the study of the topic.

In a historical essay based on research, students were required to:

- devise a key inquiry question and hypothesis
- conduct research to investigate historical sources beyond the sources provided in class
- demonstrate sustained analysis, evaluation and synthesis of evidence to support the hypothesis
- practice ethical scholarship using a recognised system of referencing, including a reference list.

Student response

Note: The following sample is an unedited authentic student response produced with permission. Any images or sources that do not have copyright approval have been redacted from the response. The response may contain errors and/or omissions that do not affect its overall match to the characteristics indicated in the top performance levels of the instrument-specific marking guide.

Key inquiry question:

To what extent is the traditional historical discourse's depiction of Marcus Licinius Crassus as the least influential member of the First Triumvirate in the final decades of the Roman Republic an accurate representation of his social, political and military power?

Marcus Licinius Crassus (cos. 70, 55) was a Roman businessman, general and politician who was one of the leading statesmen in the final decades of the Roman Republic alongside Gaius Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus in the First Triumvirate. However, Crassus' reputation has often suffered due to the legacies of Pompey and Caesar dominating the historical discourse. Theodor Mommsen, in his *History of Rome* (1854), referred to Crassus as "for years being reckoned among the heads of the three-headed monster without any proper title to be so included. He served as the makeweight to trim the balance between the real regents Pompeius and Caesar". This portrayal of Crassus, consistent amongst other traditional historians, fails to accurately represent the true power and influence he held.

Crassus' businesses, oratory abilities and ambitious nature afforded him a large level of influence in Roman society, his military prowess as a general under Sulla and later as praetor against Spartacus was responsible for altering the course of the Roman Republic, and his ability to dilute the power of Caesar and Pompey enabled him to initially hold the largest level of influence in the alliance.

Prior to the formation of the First Triumvirate, Crassus was a significant individual and dominant force in Roman social life. The dominant depiction of Crassus' character in the historical discourse is that he was an immoral citizen who was only concerned with the accumulation of wealth, which he obtained through slave labour and trading (Mommsen, 1854). Historian Cadoux (1956, pp. 2) revises this

perspective, proposing that: "his methods of acquiring wealth were subjected to a more ungenerous scrutiny than those, in most respects similar, employed by others at the time". Cadoux substantiates this claim by highlighting that slave labour and trading was a common feature of the ancient world. He further comments that "nor was Crassus a miser- with him love of wealth was subordinated to love of power". Despite the presence of some subjectivity throughout Cadoux's thesis, his revisionist perspective and critical analysis of sources infers his conclusions to be reliable. In his book, *Rubicon* (2003), contemporary historian Holland summarises Crassus' influence in Roman social life in his statement that: "Little could happen in Rome of which Crassus was not immediately aware, sensitive as he was to every tremor, every fluttering of every fly caught in his web". This proves significant in explicitly demonstrating the level of power Crassus' business ventures afforded him, thus enabling him to service his ambition for authority. However, there is a more nuanced side of Crassus' character often overlooked by historians. In his *Life of Crassus*, Plutarch writes that "after making himself one of the most powerful speakers at Rome, his care and application enabled him to surpass those who were most gifted by nature" (Plut, *Crass.*, 3.2). This commendation of Crassus' oratory abilities provides relevant evidence that his financial superiority was not the only source of his social power. Plutarch's writings have come under intense scrutiny by modern scholars, with his limited use of scientific history, use of secondary sources, focus on moral issues and the general anecdotal, sentimental and dramatic nature of his writings all resulting in modern historians questioning his reliability. Nevertheless, this claim corroborates with Cicero's recount of Crassus' oratory abilities in *Brutus*, that states:

"With only a moderate rhetorical training and with even less natural endowment, yet by hard work and application, and especially by careful use of his personal influence in ensuring the success of his pleas, he was for some years one of the leaders at the bar." (Cic., *ad Brut*, 233)

Cicero is a primary source who was distasteful towards Crassus and the First Triumvirate as he viewed its power as a threat to his beloved Roman Republic. Thus, his praise of Crassus, despite his worldview, as well as his corroboration with Plutarch's statement, proves this extract to be reliable and significant in summarising how Crassus' personal influence and powerful oration, fuelled by his desire for power

and accumulation of wealth, saw him become one of the leaders in Roman society prior to the First Triumvirate.

Crassus was also a capable military general who achieved success as a lieutenant to Sulla and subsequently as praetor against Spartacus. Plutarch, in his description of the Battle of Colline Gate in the *Life of Crassus*, wrote that: "while Sulla was defeated and his army repulsed and shattered, Crassus was victorious with the right wing [and] pursued the enemy till nightfall" (Plut., *Crass.*, 6.6). By contrasting Crassus' success against the defeat of the perceived great military general Sulla, Plutarch provides a significant depiction of Crassus' ability as a soldier. This perspective is reiterated in the contemporary writings of Matyszak (2014) and Telford (2014), who credit Sulla's eventual defeat of Marius and ascent to become ruler of Rome to Crassus' victory. Crassus also experienced military success in 71 BCE, where, as praetor, he quelled Spartacus' Third Servile Revolt. However, as retold by Plutarch:

"... his success did not fail to enhance the reputation of Pompey. For the fugitives from the battle encountered that general and were cut to pieces, so he could write to the senate that in open battle, indeed, Crassus had conquered the slaves, but that he himself had extirpated the war." (Plut., *Crass.*, 11.7)

This depiction of the war is relevant in demonstrating that, despite Crassus succeeding in his campaign against Spartacus and deserving the subsequent glory, Pompey defeated the last of the slaves, and thus claimed that he had ended the revolt. Plutarch's accreditation of the victory to Crassus is corroborated by Velleius Paterculus' statement that "The glory of ending this war belongs to Marcus Crassus, who was soon by unanimous consent to be regarded as the first citizen in the state" (Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History*, 2.30.5). Velleius' explicit affirmation that Crassus' military victory against Spartacus confirmed his position as the most powerful man in Rome proves extremely significant in demonstrating how Crassus' ability as a general serviced his main objective of increasing his personal political influence. Velleius was a Roman general writing several generations later under the emperor Tiberius and is known to be partial towards the Caesarean faction. This perspective infers a negative bias against Pompey, thus not deeming his accreditation of the victory to Crassus as inherently reliable. Nevertheless, the corroboration between ancient sources implies the trustworthiness of this claim.

Despite Crassus' obvious capabilities as a soldier, his military career has often been defined by his defeat and eventual death at the hands of the Parthians. Even though his 20-year absence from military command and desire for glory was apparent in his poor decision making, the reason for his defeat can also be attributed to unfortunate circumstances, such as his advisor Ariamnes' betrayal, not just his poor leadership (Holland, 2003). Nevertheless, Crassus was a distinguished military general whose victory at Colline Gate directly influenced Sulla's rise to power, who should be credited with ending the Third Servile Revolt, and whose capabilities have been unfairly discounted due to his defeat when returning to military leadership after decades of political governance.

Despite Caesar's legacy overshadowing Crassus' political career, Crassus was initially the most powerful member of the First Triumvirate due to his success in quelling the influence of his fellow members. The traditional perspective regarding the political alliance was that Caesar was always the leading member of the three. As stated by Cadoux (1956), Mommsen "made him responsible for the coalition of Pompeius and Crassus in 71-70 BCE" in his 1854 publication. Mommsen's book influenced many 20th century historians to form similar conclusions, with Carcopino . and Bloch (1952) also claiming that "it is [Caesar] who holds the threads and will conduct the play to its climax". Mommsen was writing in Germany just before its unification and was partial towards Caesar, as he desired a similarly ambitious figure to emerge and lead Germany, resulting in his reliability being questioned. Revisionist scholars have since formed alternate perspectives on the initial power balance in the First Triumvirate. Historian Marsh (1927) wrote that "the later greatness of this man has served to cast a fictitious glamour over his early career", explicitly demonstrating that Caesar's legacy resulted in historians glorifying his actions. Crassus was able to ensure Caesar's loyalty and inferiority through funding his military campaigns. In his description of Caesar's Gaul campaign, Cadoux wrote that:

"Crassus the great financier and politician was to stay in Rome, silently wielding his power; another man, Caesar was to hold the *imperium* for him. If Caesar were to be moderately successful in Gaul, which might well be expected, Crassus' position was assured; if Caesar failed, Crassus would simply look round for a new partner." (Cadoux, 1956)

This source significantly highlights how Caesar effectively wielded Crassus' power,

as, prior to his success in Gaul, he lacked any personal *imperium*, further refuting the traditional historical discourse that he was always the premier member of the alliance. The plan of the Catiline conspiracy further emphasises how Crassus in fact initially held more influence than Caesar. In the words of Suetonius:

'The design was to set upon the senate at the opening of the year and put to the sword as many as they thought good; then Crassus was to usurp the dictatorship, naming Caesar as his master of horse, and when they had organized the state according to their pleasure, the consulship was to be restored to Sulla and Autronius.'" (Suet., *Jul.*, 9)

This extract is significant in illustrating how at the time of the Catiline conspiracy in 63 BCE, Crassus was of higher standing than Caesar, and thus deemed to be the one most capable of assuming the dictatorship should it have been successful. Suetonius' writings suffer from the lack of reliability of their own sources, as he concentrates on personal anecdotes to recount events over a century prior, thus potentially inhibiting the reliability of this statement. Pompey, on the other hand, remained "the dupe of the other two", as Crassus was able to "reduce his old rival to political impotence" through alienating Pompey from his allies in the senate (Cadoux, 1956). Although initially a supporter of Pompey, Cicero, in one of his *Letters to Atticus*, recounts how he was able to "cement a friendship with Crassus" (Cic., *Att.*, 16), demonstrating how Crassus succeeded in reducing Pompey's influence over former allies. Cicero's recount of Crassus' success in manipulating senators against Pompey corroborates with writing from Appian detailing how Crassus "co-operated with Lucullus" to refute Pompey's request for land for his veterans and further undermine his political influence (App., *BC*, 9). Appian, like Suetonius, also suffers from the unreliability of his sources and is not inherently critical with evidence.

Despite these questions surrounding Appian's reliability, his corroboration with Cicero in detailing Crassus' strategy to dilute the political influence of Pompey affirms the source's reliability. As such, Crassus' funding of Caesar's military campaigns and alienating of Pompey from his traditional allies in the Senate ultimately resulted in him becoming the leading citizen in Rome during the initial stages of the First Triumvirate, as was inferred through the plan of the Catiline conspiracy.

Crassus' use of his businesses and oratory abilities to fund his ambition for administrative power saw him become a prominent member of Roman society prior to the formation of the First Triumvirate, while his military victories at Colline Gate and in the Third Servile Revolt had a great impact on Roman history. In the early days of First Triumvirate, Crassus' success in manipulating Caesar and Pompey into positions of inferiority resulted in him becoming the leading citizen in Rome, as is evidenced in him being first in line for a potential dictatorship. Thus, the traditional historical discourse's depiction of Crassus as having possessed the least social, political, and military influence out of the First Triumvirate members is inaccurate. Crassus' eventual death at the hands of the Parthians and the ensuing power struggle between Pompey and Caesar justified his importance in the First Triumvirate as not simply a makeweight between the two, but the initial premier member of the alliance.

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