

THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
DE REGIMINE PRINCIPUM
BY ST THOMAS AQUINAS

1267 A.D.

Note: This text describes an evolutionary arc in Roman history commencing in the rule of the one, passing through the rule of the few, then (impliedly) the rule of the many, and ending in monarchy. This sequence is consistent with the base sequence of one-few-many-one found in the Polybian version of Anacyclosis. (cf. The Institute's revised version of Anacyclosis in which the base sequence runs one-few-many-few-one.) Though the description below does not expressly encompass a democratic or popular phase, such is implied by the phrase "government of the many" contained in the chapter heading. Footnotes in the original text have been omitted.

Book 1

Chapter V: How varied the forms of government were among the Romans; and that their commonwealth sometimes prospered under the government of many

Because both the best and the worst can occur in a monarchy – that is, under government by one – the evil of tyranny has rendered the dignity of kingship odious to many. For sometimes those who desire to be ruled by a king fall victim instead to the savagery of tyrants, and a great many rulers have exerted tyrannical sway under the pretext of royal dignity. Clear examples of this appear in the case of the Roman commonwealth. For the kings were expelled by the Roman people when they could no longer bear the burden of their rule, or, rather, of their tyranny. They then instituted for themselves consuls and other magistrates by whom they commenced to be ruled and guided, wishing to exchange kingship for aristocracy; and, as Sallust remarks, "It is incredible to recall how swiftly the city of Rome grew once she had achieved her liberty." For it often happens that men living under a king are reluctant to exert themselves for the common good, no doubt supposing that whatever they do for the common good will not benefit them but someone else who is seen to have the goods of the community under his own power. But if no one person is seen to have such power, they no longer regard the common good as if it belonged to someone else, but each now regards it as his own. Experience therefore seems to show that a single city governed by rulers who hold office for one year only can sometimes accomplish more than a king can even if he has three or four cities, and that small services exacted by kings bear more heavily than great burdens imposed [on itself] by a community of citizens. This principle was exemplified during the emergence of the Roman commonwealth; for the common people were enlisted into the army and paid wages for military service, and when the common treasury was not sufficient to pay the wages, private wealth was put to public use to such an extent that not even the senators retained anything made of gold for themselves apart from one gold ring and one seal each, which were the insignia of their rank. Presently, however, the Romans became exhausted by the continual quarrels which eventually grew into civil wars, and the liberty which they had so striven to attain was then snatched from their hands by those civil wars, and they began to be under the power of the emperors: who at first would not allow themselves to be called kings, because the name of king was odious to the Romans. Some of these emperors faithfully pursued the common good, as kings should, and the Roman commonwealth was increased and preserved by their efforts. Most of them, however, were tyrants to their subjects and weak and ineffective in the face of their enemies, and these brought the Roman commonwealth to naught. ...

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