CHAPTER ONE

WHY ‘SULLA EPAPHRODITOS’?

A good starting point for this discussion is provided by the events that took place in Boeotia during and immediately after the Mithridatic War. The literary sources indeed offer many interesting, if isolated, elements, which may be viewed as symptoms of more widespread patterns. What matters most to this discussion, however, is that the history of the region during this period is closely linked to the panhellenic sanctuaries, a front of the Sullan campaign in Greece, which turned out to be decisive in his relations with the Greek world as a whole.

Sulla’s depredation of the Greek sanctuaries is reported by Plutarch, who links the siege of Athens directly to Sulla’s need for fresh resources. Interestingly, he stresses an aspect of Sulla’s conduct before and after the conquest of Athens: his striking, even appalling indifference towards Greek religious institutions and sanctuaries. According to Plutarch, when Sulla sent Caphis of Titheora, a Greek member of his entourage, to collect the treasure of the Delphic Amphictyony, his envoy was extremely wary and ended by bursting into tears in front of the priests of Apollo, fearing the possible consequences of such an impious act. When he wrote to Sulla claiming that he had witnessed some unfortunate presages, he received a mocking reply and was ordered to withdraw the treasure at any rate. Plutarch makes it clear that only political convenience—mainly determined by the need to keep the favour of his army—mattered to Sulla at that stage. Piety could happily be left aside and rediscovered after the victory. Allegations of impiousness, however, could turn out to be a political problem in the meantime.

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1 Plut. Sull. 12.5.
2 Plut. Sull. 12.6–8. The chronology of the episode cannot be determined: Daux 1956, 399. About Caphis, see Plut. Sull. 15.5, with Robert 1960, 82–84; C.P. Jones 1971, 41–42 argues that Plutarch was told about Caphis’ deeds by his friend Soclarus, who was from Titheora himself.
The negotiations between Caphis and the Amphictyones show how important a factor religion could be in the relations between Sulla and the Greek world since the beginning of the Mithridatic War. The record of the Roman general was both inconsistent and controversial in this respect. No doubt, some episodes did not help him to earn a good reputation. In Athens he was blamed for hunting Aristion down to the temple of Athena, where the former tyrant had fled after the Romans had stormed in the city. According to Pausanias, who has a consistently negative bias against Sulla but whom there is no reason to disbelieve on this matter, he was also responsible for the sack of at least two Greek temples.

At Orchomenus, he stole from the Myние sanctuary a standing statue of Dionysus, made by Myron, which he later dedicated again on Helicon, where many other statues of the gods and the muses were on display. Pausanias bitterly remarks that Sulla’s behaviour is the most vivid illustration of a Greek proverb, “to worship gods with other people’s incense”.

Pausanias is the only source mentioning hostile actions of Sulla against Orchomenus. A destruction of the city can safely be ruled out, as the story of Damon shows the local elite actively plotting against Chaeronea in the immediate aftermath of the war. In fact, the eventual attempt of the Orchomenians to damage Chaeronea by questioning its loyalty to Rome is probably to be explained in light of a crisis they suffered at Sulla’s hands. According to another passage of the Periegesis, Sulla’s misdeeds caused a severe crisis for the city, comparable to that which other Greek associates of Mithridates suffered: “Sulla’s treatment of the Athenians was fierce and alien to the character of the Romans, but it was consistent with his treatment of the Thebans and the Orchomenians.”

4 The crime committed by the victorious general was so awful that Pausanias viewed it (1.20.7) as the cause of his horrible death, caused by the same disease which had caused the death of the philosopher Pherecydes of Syrus. Different accounts of Aristion’s death in App. Mithr. 39.151 and Plut. Sull. 14.11–12. A list of other famous characters allegedly killed by the same illness as Sulla is provided by Plutarch too (Sull. 36.5).

5 On the booty that Sulla gathered in the Greek East, see Pape 1975, 21–22; Waurick 1975, 44, 46. The shipwreck discovered near Mahdia, in modern Tunisia, has been viewed as a that of the ship carrying part of the booty that Sulla gathered at Athens (on which see Luc. Zeux. 3). There is, in fact, no way to prove that, and a dating to 100 BC ca. is most likely: Hellenkemper-Salies 1994.


7 Paus. 9.33.6: Σύλλα δέ ἐστι μὲν καὶ τὰ ἐς Ἀθηναίων ἀνήμερα καὶ ἦδους ἄλλοτρα