Verres, Cicero and Other Collectors in Late Republican Rome*

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Cicero and Verres

In the Verrine orations we can find information about the collections of wealthy provincials, some of whom became cives romani, and about the abundance of works of art and precious objects from Sicily and other places in the Roman world where Verres had previously held institutional assignments. The orations are a unique testimony not only of the works of art and precious objects obtained by the accused, but also of how (often doubtful and unclear) the ruling class of the late Roman Republic, now deeply “Hellenized” (Paoletti, 2003: 1019 n. 18), engaged in collecting. In addition, the correspondence of Cicero provides evidence for his own collecting practices.

Although antithetic in many aspects, Verres and Cicero, emblematic figures of their time (Favaretto, 2002: 22–23), shared great competence in matters of art (even if this aspect has sometimes been doubted about Verres due to Cicero’s biased prosecution account, there should be no doubts about his preparation in the subject; see, for example, Paoletti, 2003: 1000, 1002; Robert, 2009: 63–69) and the passion of collecting. Nevertheless, their approaches to collecting were very different – even opposite – due to their own particular personalities and the cultural milieu they habitually frequented.

During his journey in Greece and in Asia Minor (79–77 BCE) to support his studies, Cicero visited places in the Greek world (Athenai, Rhodos, Smyrne) which were famous for their works of art and personally met neo-attic artists such as Pasiteles and Arkhelaos, through whom he refined his artistic taste. His direct contact with Greek art continued in Sicily in 75 BCE, when he was quaestor in Lilybaion.

Verres first met the world of the Greek art during his legatio Asiatica accompanying Cnaeus Cornelius Dolabella in 80 BCE (Cicero, in Verrem ii.1,41–102) and then, between 73 and 71 BCE, when he was Sicily’s governor. Astounding is the quantity, the quality, and the variety of works of art and precious objects of which the propraetor, driven by a passion which bordered on cupiditas, appropriated from the island (for a summary see Paoletti, 2003: 1010, table 1, 1011, table 2; Bounia, 2004: 278–279; Lazzeretti, 2006: figs. 39–40). Verres urged the provincials to give him whatever attracted his attention whether it be for the work’s high artistic prestige (Miles, 2008: 168–169), its intrinsic value (Paoletti, 2003: 1002; Miles, 2008: 163–164), its antiquity (Miles, 2008: 163), its artistic attribution, or other elements, such as the fame of its previous owners. If we only consider the specific cases mentioned by Cicero, Verres robbed not only the original sculptures of famous Greek artists, like the statues by Praxiteles, Myron, Polykleitos from the sacrarium domesticum of Caius Heius in Messene, and the Sappho by Silanion from the prytaneion of Syrakousai, but also statues by unknown sculptors, such as the one which was stolen from Liso of Lilybaion or those robbed from the sanctuaries and the public areas of Segesta, Himera, Tyndaris, Akragas, Assorus, Henna and Syrakousai. The situation is similar for the tabulæ depicting the pugna equestris Agatocli regis and the 27 portraits of Sicilians kings and tyrants sacked from the Ateanion of Syrakousai with the valvae of the temple, the Attalica peripetasmata also from Caius Heius and other valuable fabrics from Quintus Caecilius Dio of Halaisa and Heraclius of Syrakousai, Hiero 11’s phalerae stolen from Philarcus of Centuripae and others from Aristus of Panormos and Cratippus of Tyndaris, the hydria by Boethos of Kalkhedon taken from Pamphilus from Lilybaion, the pocula Therictia, or embossed silverware, made by Mentor, owned by Diodorus of Malta, the eculae argentei – the silver glasses terminating in a horse head – that once belonged to Quintus Maximus, probably the Cunctator, robbed from the Roman eques Cnaeus Calidius; the candelabrum studded with jewels and other precious objects stolen from the prince Antiochus of Syria when

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he stopped in Sicily, returning from Roma, the ivory tusks of an incredible size and the graminae hastae plundered from the Fanum Iunonis of Malta, and bronzes from Delos and Korinthos (about the corinthian bronze see, for example, Bounia, 2004: 195–196), or the emble mata detached from censers and the patereae and sigilla removed from patellae, rings.

How did all of these works of art and all these precious items stolen by Verres during the three years in Sicily disappear? What about all the art which he had already robbed during his legatio Asiatica in the year 80 BCE? What about the year 74 BCE, during his praetura urbana (Cicero, in Verrem ii.1,103–158), described by Cicero as a period of plundering of temples and public buildings (Cicero, in Verrem ii.1,12)? Finally, where did all those goods (rebus omnibus) which he robbed undique (Cicero, in Verrem ii.3,9) end up?

According to Cicero, many went to his urban domus and to his numerous villae (Cicero, in Verrem ii.4,6: “domum deinde atque ad suas villas auferebant”); ii.4,126: “Verres haec habeat dom, Verres ornamentis fanorum atque oppidorum habeat plenam domum, villas referatas”; ii.4,36: “multa ad villas suas positas”; i.i.57: “in tuis tectis”). Many of Verres’ statues and paintings adorned the Forum and the Comitium (Cicero, in Verrem ii.3,9). Many works of art were deposited by Verres with his friends in their villas (“multa deposita apud amicos”, “in suburbana amicorum”, Cicero in Verrem i.i.54; cf. i.i.57: “in amicorum tuorum tectis”; ii.3,9: “vestras villas” etc.). Many were donated to others (in Verrem ii.4,3: “multa alis data atque donata”). A small number of villae, as Cicero emphasized, were so full of numerous and beautiful works plundered from Romans’ most faithful allies that they seemed to contain the entirety of Asia, Greece and Sicily (in Verrem ii.5,127: “totam denique Asia, Achaiam, Graeciam, Siciliam, tam in paucis villis inclusas esse videatis”?). Verres’ silver collections adorned banquets (in Verrem ii.3,9: “huius argento dominia vestra?”).

Following Cicero we can start our research with Verres’ dwellings. Unfortunately the location of his domus in Roma (Cicero, in Verrem ii.1,51; 54) is unknown (Eck, 1995) and there are no clues to reconstruct its appearance, although we can imagine it was large and sumptuous, suited to the rank of its owner, an eques son of a senator. In addition to an atrium (Cicero in Verrem ii.1,61) and a peristylium (in Verrem ii.1,50–51), both of them characteristic of important Roman domus, no elements of explicit description of Verres’ urban house are provided by Cicero (the only source we have), except for the presence of a “green space” (Papi, 1998: 45–47, 61 and n. 84), indicated by the Latin noun silva (Cicero, in Verrem ii.1,51) which probably was a grove with trees arranged regularly, “all’italiana?” (Carandini, 2010: 298).

During the same period a silva is known in Atticus’ dwelling (not sumptuous but known for its amoenitas due to the silva itself) on the Quirinal (the so-called Domus Tampiliana, which Atticus had inherited from an uncle, Cicero ad Atticum iii.20, dated 20 October 58 BCE, placed between the Temple of Salus and that of Quirinus on the corner of Clivus Salutatis and Alta Semita, Cicero, ad Atticum iv.1–4; xi.45,3; see Grimal, 1984: 110, 137 with notes) and another one in Augustus’ domus on the Palatine (Carandini, 2010: 298). Possessing a silva in one’s own home was, as far as we know, the prerogative of only a few; its presence signified his social status and his wealth. Like in Atticus’ abode, probably Verres’ silva was a relic of the past (Grimal, 1984: 110), unimaginable in a densely populated neighbourhood, which could suggest, for Verres’ domus, a location in an area not too central.

With villae (Cicero, in Verrem ii.4,36; 58; 126; also ii.1,38) Cicero indicated numerous other Verres’ properties, one of which, acquired during the proscriptions, was probably in Beneventum (Shatzman, 1975: 436, 454) or in any case in Campania. The other unknown villae also had to be in popular places of that time.

Cicero personally saw in Velia the huge cargo ship offered as gift from Messene with which Verres left Sicily at the end of his propraetura. The vessel sailed with the objects of his robberies, his raids and his thefts, all those things which he did not want to send to Roma earlier on with the rest of the booty, because they were very dear and they gave him great pleasure (Cicero, in Verrem ii.5,44). But Cicero didn’t mention where exactly Verres had placed in his urban house the works of art and the precious objects plundered in Sicily. It is presumed (Robert, 2009: 61 and n. 73 with previous bibliography) that in the 70 BCE he did not have enough time to place in urban house his precious Sicilian loot.

Verres’ Asian Booty and Its Collocation

Even before his praetura, Verres’ urban domus was already full of beautiful statues (Cicero in Verrem ii.4,36: “domus plena signorum pulcherrimorum iam ante praeturam”) plundered during his legatio Asiatica (Cicero, in Verrem ii.1,51). Cicero saw them personally when, not long before (nuper) he was there to affix the sigilla (in Verrem ii.1,50). They were “ad omnes columnas, omnibus etiam intercolumniis, in silva denique disposita sub divo” (in Verrem ii.1,51), placed, not only at each column and between the columns, against the impluvium in the atrium, but also