Why No Warlords in Republican Rome?

Nathan Rosenstein

As John Rich cogently argues in his chapter in this volume, warlordism does not furnish a useful category of analysis for republican Rome. Much of course depends on what exactly we take a warlord to be, and unfortunately little agreement exists about precisely how to define the term. Political scientists and students of international relations, who tend to be quite exacting in their demands for definitional precision, have offered a variety of descriptions of just what constitutes a warlord, but definitions based on the experience of modern nation-states or even failed states do not map well onto those of Italy in the fourth through the first centuries BC. Instead, in this period we might imagine that a warlord would be someone who controls a region small or large primarily by virtue of his control over an armed force rather than because he is an agent of the state, state authority within the region being either weak or non-existent. His control of his army in turn would derive not from any magistracy or other state-sanctioned position but principally from the personal loyalty of his soldiers. Further, the warlord’s goals would in the main be non-ideological but rather personal profit either in the form of wealth or power or both.

Defined in this way, warlord-like figures quite possibly were a feature of sixth and fifth century Italy.¹ At a time when state structures were rudimentary and weak—if they existed at all—the Vibenna brothers or Poplios Valesios appear to have been charismatic leaders of military forces. Their goals however remain unknown, and the bands they led seem not to have controlled any particular area of Italy but roamed from one place to another. The leaders of clan-based war-bands like the Fabii, who undertook something like a private war against Veii, and perhaps Attus Clausus with his kinsmen and clients may also fit our definition of warlords to some extent, particularly insofar as they were associated with particular parts of Roman territory.² However the evidence is much too fragmentary and unreliable to reach definitive conclusions.³

Beginning in the later second century, aristocratic cohesion began to break down and competition among aristocrats to serve the res publica started to entail challenging the senate’s control of it. By the early first century political

¹ On warlords in early Rome see now Armstrong 2016.
² Note that each gens is associated with a specific tribal region: Taylor 1960: 40–1, 35–6 on their locations.
³ Rawlings 1999; Armstrong 2013.
rivalry had on occasion spilled out of the forum and comitia and onto the battlefield. At this point we start to encounter figures whom we might term warlords. However, for one reason or another it is difficult to fit them into the definition sketched above. So despite the fact that during his eight years in Gaul Julius Caesar acted with nearly complete independence and was effectively beyond the senate’s control, he considered himself and was considered by the senate a promagistrate acting on behalf of the Republic. Caesar unquestionably focused much of his attention on accumulating wealth during his time there, but this hardly set him apart from any other Republican general. His goals were primarily political, and the wealth he accumulated in Gaul he directed towards building up his political position in Rome.

Even after the outbreak of civil war in 49, when the institutions of Republican governance collapsed, Caesar persisted in identifying himself as a magistrate, securing election as consul for 48 and then appointment as dictator every year thereafter. Still, his position did not depend on those offices but the support of his army, so in that sense he meets our definition of a warlord. However, his ambitions were hardly limited to securing his control over some part of Italy or Rome’s empire; he wanted the whole thing. Caesar’s goals at this stage thus became even more political and focused—if not initially on changing the nature of the government at least gaining control of it. And once he had done so by defeating his enemies at Pharsalus, he effectively became the state, which he then defended against those remaining opponents who sought to overthrow him.

The latter, too, in some ways fit our definition of warlords in that the rump of Pompey’s allies in Africa and his sons and their supporters in Spain depended on the loyalty of their soldiers to sustain their positions. On the other hand, Caesar’s opponents in Africa were not seeking to carve off an autonomous power base from Rome’s empire but to use this as a position from which to regain control of it. The goals of Pompey’s sons in Spain are more difficult to fathom, but they are likely to have been the same. And while all of these figures sought to raise money, they employed it in the service of overtly political goals and often with an expressed ideological agenda involving restoration of the legitimate form and operation of the Republican government. They did not intend their positions to be permanent but transitory, simply a means to an end. Sulla, too, throughout his time in Greece and during his campaign in Italy considered himself the Republic’s duly appointed proconsul. Despite his designation as a hostis by the government in Rome, his position was that that government was illegitimate, having come into power by force after 87. His goal was to free the Republic from the tyranny of those who had seized control.

4 Keaveney 2005.