Sulla, the Army, the Officers and the poleis of Greece: A Reassessment of Warlordism in the First Phase of the Mithridatic Wars

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In 87 BC, Sulla crossed the Adriatic in the capacity of proconsul, entrusted with the task of vanquishing the King of Pontus, Mithridates VI Eupator. Five legions, a few cohorts and the cavalry accompanied him. In order to secure supplies of cash, the senators resorted to a desperate solution. They voted to seize and sell the sacred treasure supposedly donated by the legendary King Numa, in order to finance sacrifices to the gods. The sale of this precious ancient treasure, however, yielded only nine thousand pounds of gold. But, τοσήδε μὲν ἦν τότε πάντων ἀπορία καὶ ἐς πάντα φιλοτιμία, ‘so limited were their means at the time, and so unlimited their ambition’.

Shortly afterwards, in 86 BC, when the balance of power in Rome enabled L. Cornelius Cinna to gain control, supplies for Sulla’s army were cut off, Sulla was declared a public enemy (hostis), and command was transferred to the consul Marius. After Marius’s unexpected death, the consul suffectus L. Valerius Flaccus replaced him, took over the governorship of Asia and was sent out to the East. Although Memnon mentions that Flaccus was ordered to cooperate with Sulla, this seems difficult given that Sulla was a hostis and he would not readily compromise and consent to being replaced by Flaccus or allow him to win the glory of the victor over Mithridates. Moreover, Sulla felt that this army was not in fact directed against Rome’s chief enemy but against him personally, λόγῳ μὲν ἐπὶ Μιθριδάτην, ἐργῷ δὲ ἐπ’ ἐκείνον αὐτὸν (Plut. Sull. 20.1). Flaccus was later executed by his quaestor, C. Flavius Fimbria, who took command of the force, and later was granted confirmation from Rome. Sulla was, on the

1 Appian, Mithridatika 30. On Sulla’s appointment as commander of the war against Mithridates and for the subsequent political events, see de Blois 2007, 169–172 and also for the composition of his army see Cagniart 2007: 82 and 83.
3 App. Bellum Civile 1.73; 77; 81; Mithr. 51; Lovano 2002: 97.
4 Badian 1962, 56–57 on the Concordia that was formally maintained. Lovano 2002: 98–99 (with bibliography) argues that Flaccus intended to anticipate Sulla and steal the glory of the victory ‘before Sulla could free his hands of affairs in Greece’. Seager 2008: 181 accepts that Memnon’s mention (FrGrH 24.1) may however reflect the Roman attempts to reach reconciliation with Sulla.
contrary, still a *hostis* and was thus treated as ‘no more than a warlord in charge of his own personal client army’, as H. Flower has stated.\(^5\)

The label of ‘warlord’ has been applied to Sulla and other commanders in historical studies concerning the Republican period in a rather rhetoric use,\(^6\) transferring a term, which is a modern coinage used by social sciences (always with negative connotations) for modern military rulers.\(^7\) ‘Warlord’ became popular among medieval and ancient historians in the 1980s and 1990s respectively;\(^8\) however, its anachronistic use for antiquity should take into account ancient criteria. Moreover, if an equivalent phenomenon is to be traced in antiquity, the features of an ancient ‘warlord’ should be determined. Recent studies have pointed out the need for a definition of some key points of agreement on the nature of a ‘warlord’, even in regard to modern ‘warlords’. Some attempts to formulate these key points have been undertaken,\(^9\) beyond the general emphasis on the dominance of a leader on the basis of military strength, since various studies focus on different aspects of the phenomenon.

Some of the key points in the definition of a ‘warlord’, formulated for modern ‘warlords’ by A. Giustozzi and by John MacKinlay, seem to be applicable to Sulla: Sulla ‘had full and autonomous control over a military force, which he could use at will, and was able to ‘provide important services to subordinate commanders, such as leadership, coordination, logistics ...’. Also, ‘he exercised political power over part of the territory of a state, where central authority had weakened’. As more *poleis* sided with Mithridates, ‘he used violence to...

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5 Flower 2010: 93.
8 For an overview of the use of the term ‘warlord’, see Giustozzi 2005: 2–3. As to approaches to ‘warlordism’ in the past, see McGeorge 2002: 2 who notes that ‘the basis of their political power was military power’ without any further attempt to define the term more closely. Whittaker 2002: 277–302 emphasizes the emergence of soldiers-landlords and their semi-private armies in the Later Roman period. On this period see also Liebeschuetz 2007: 479–494. For further attempts to define the term see Giustozzi 2005: 5 and 14; MacKinlay 2000; Marten 2012: 3–7.
9 See an approach to modern ‘warlordism’ in Marten’s 2012 definition (where earlier bibliography is to be found): ‘Warlords are individuals who control small pieces of territory using a combination of force and patronage’ (p. 3); ‘The word ‘force’ in my definition denotes the fact that warlords command loyal militias that are not under state control.... ‘Patronage’ is the ability to distribute resources to supporters based on informal ties and personal preferences, without being subject to laws or other abstract social rules’, (p. 6).