SULLA THE WARLORD
AND OTHER MYTHICAL BEASTS

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My primary concern in this paper will be with Plutarch’s *Life of Sulla* 12, which forms part of his narrative of the first Mithridatic War. We are in late 87. The Pontic forces have invaded Greece and Sulla has been sent to deal with them. He is currently besieging Athens. However, being denied supplies from home he is obliged to levy monies from the shrines of Greece.1 Plutarch was indignant at this as he tells us how those who were taking the treasures from Delphi were upset:

So the treasures were sent away and certainly most of the Greeks did not know what was happening. But the silver jar, the last of the royal gifts still in existence, was too large and heavy for the baggage animals to carry and the Amphictyons were compelled to cut it into pieces. As they did so they called to mind the names of Titus Flamininus and Manius Acilius and Aemilius Paulus too. One of these had driven Antiochus out of Greece and the others had conquered the Kings of Macedonia. And these men had not only kept their hands off the temples of the Greeks, but had endowed them and honoured them and done much to add to the general respect in which they were held. But these, they reflected, were the lawfully constituted commanders of disciplined troops who had learned to obey orders without a murmur; they were kingly in soul, but moderate in their personal outlay, keeping their expenditure to the ordinary fixed allowances of the time; and they thought that to show subservience to their own soldiers was more disgraceful than to show fear in the face of the enemy. But now the generals of this later period were men who had risen to the top by violence rather than by merit; they needed armies to fight against one another rather than against the public enemy; and so they were forced to combine the arts of the politician with the authority of the general. They spent money on making life easy for their soldiers and then, after purchasing their labour in this way, failed to observe that they had made their whole country a thing for sale and had put themselves in a position where they had to be the slaves of the worst sort of people in order to become masters of the better. This is what caused the exile of Marius and this was what brought him back again against Sulla. This was what made Cinna’s party murder Octavius and Fimbria’s party murder Flaccus. And here it was Sulla more than anyone

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1 For background see Keaveney (1983) 78–86; Ballesteros/Pastor (1996) 81–190.
else who set the example. In order to corrupt and win over to himself the soldiers of other generals, he gave his own troops a good time and spent money lavishly on them. He was thus at the same time encouraging the evils both of treachery and of debauchery. All this required much money and especially was it required for this siege.

Now, all of this appears plausible and coherent. Sulla is behaving as we might expect a late republican general to behave and is, in short, a warlord. When we probe it, however, we find it to be false in every particular. I pass over Plutarch’s failure to mention that the Greeks themselves had in the past behaved thus and that Sulla had repaid what he had taken.\(^2\) Rather I wish to concentrate on his position and actions as a Roman.

To begin with, while we may acknowledge Sulla was a figure of controversy, he was, nevertheless, in my view a properly constituted consul and proconsul. Attempts to deprive him of his command were violent and unlawful. Certainly Sulla never saw himself as anything but the duly appointed servant of the Roman state and went to extreme lengths to emphasise it.\(^3\) And, if we accept this, then we can hardly agree that Sulla rose by violence rather than merit. Ultimately, of course, Sulla did fight a civil war over this issue of legitimacy but it hardly fits the facts to say he was nourishing his troops in order to turn them against the state. After all he was using them to fight Mithridates. Confrontation with authority was hardly his primary objective.\(^4\) It is certainly true that Sulla saw to it that his troops were well rewarded—at the expense of the people of Asia. We must realise, however, that this was not the attempt to buy their loyalty, which we might infer from reading Plutarch. Rather he was punishing the Asiatics for their disloyalty and providing his men with what every Roman soldier regarded as his due, booty.\(^5\) Sulla’s fear that, upon returning to Italy, his men would follow custom and disperse to their homes is sufficient, I think, to dispose of the notion that he had for some time been indulging them in order to use them in an assault on Rome.\(^6\) Since Sulla had not, as Plutarch

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\(^2\) See Keaveney (1983) 86.

\(^3\) Keaveney (1982).

\(^4\) Lovano (2002) 105–110


\(^6\) Plutarch Life of Sulla 27. So far as Sulla is concerned Plutarch’s belief that he pampered his troops in order to lure those of others seems to rest on an incident in the Civil War when money played a part in bringing over Scipio’s army to Sulla: Plutarch’s Life of Sulla 28. There is, so far as I can discover, no evidence for the use of this as a systematic ploy.