



The last republican

Second Edition

Sulla

ARTHUR KEAVENEY

SULLA

Sulla is one of the most controversial figures of the Roman republic. A brilliant military leader devoted to the ideal of Rome's destiny, he has often been portrayed as simply a tyrant or despot. Arthur Keaveney's biography, first published more than twenty years ago, overturned that view in favour of a more complex portrait of a man obsessed with the belief that he was the recipient of divine favour – Sulla Felix. Sulla rose from poverty and obscurity to become the master of the Roman world. He was not a crude forerunner of the emperors but a statesman who had long pondered the ills that beset Rome. His dictatorship was dedicated to bringing in laws for the better ordering of the republic. Despite his achievements and his integrity, Sulla's constitution did not last and was swept away within a generation. In this second edition of Keaveney's biography, the text has been extensively rewritten and the findings of two decades of scholarship have been fully integrated. Written in a lively and entertaining style, designed to satisfy scholars as well as to inform students, the book introduces this pivotal figure of the late republic to a new generation of readers.

Arthur Keaveney is Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies at the University of Kent at Canterbury. Amongst his books are *Rome and the Unification of Italy* (1987), *Lucullus: A Life* (1992) and *The Life and Journey of Athenian Statesman Themistocles as a Refugee in Persia* (2003).

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Arthur Keaveney

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FOR JENNY

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

Since G. P. Baker published his semi-popular *Sulla the Fortunate* (London 1927) there has been, so far as I am aware, no full biography of Sulla in any major European language. This neglect, all the more surprising in view of the amount of attention which lesser figures like Crassus have received of late, means that Sulla is now one of the few major figures of the late Roman republic to lack a modern biography. The present work is intended to make good, in however imperfect a fashion, that deficiency. In writing it, I have tried to keep as wide an audience as possible in mind. Scholars, I dare to hope, may find here one or two items that contribute to our understanding of this important figure. At the same time, I should like to believe that the book will offer students a reasonably reliable account of Sulla's life and actions. Finally, if that ill-defined creature, the general reader, should wish to learn something of one of the most fascinating characters in antiquity, he or she will not, I trust, be repelled by a too austere presentation. Throughout I have tried to present Sulla as a real and living person. I have little sympathy with that type of biography of an ancient which, however good its scholarship, portrays its subject as a bloodless ghost or (worse) reduces it to dullness. Nor, self-evidently, can I share the view, currently fashionable in some places, that ancient history should not be written through the medium of a biography. Whether for good or ill, great personalities do stamp their impression on the age in which they live and it is, therefore, legitimate for us to enquire into the nature of the impact Sulla made on his times.

The work represents a substantial revision of my thesis 'Sulla – a biography', which was prepared under the direction of Professor A. F. Norman and awarded a PhD by the University of Hull in 1978. Writing began at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth during my tenure (1978–9) of a University of Wales Doctoral Fellowship and was completed here at Kent. The extracts from Plutarch are reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Ltd from Plutarch: *Fall of the Roman Republic*, translated by Rex Warner

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

(Penguin Classics, revised edition, 1972) pp. 45, 66, 83, 102, 108, Copyright © Rex Warner, 1958. The map of the battlefield of Chaeronea is reproduced by kind permission of Professor N. G. L. Hammond. For the other maps, which are not intended to be exhaustive but to serve as a general guide for the reader of the text, I am indebted to my wife, to Jim Styles and John West and to Jane Gregory. I also wish to express my appreciation to Mrs Elfi Corbett who typed the bulk of the manuscript.

Finally it remains for me to say that I alone am responsible for this book's shortcomings.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I have read somewhere or other that Ralph Waldo Emerson, a sage who is unlikely to have had much time for Sulla, declared that to be great is to be misunderstood. When I first wrote this book I took Sulla's greatness as given and addressed myself to the task of providing a better understanding of the man than was then available. The book has been out of print for some time but I have never lost touch with Sulla and today see no reason to alter the view I formed then of the man and his place in history. However, twenty years of scholarship means that on certain episodes and details I have changed my position. Where I have not, I have either made a brief reply to criticisms which have been entered or at least indicated where an opposing viewpoint may be found.

This edition has been made possible by individuals not institutions. Richard Stoneman who commissioned the original book commissioned this version. At an early stage Charles Young gave advice on IT matters. Jake Weekes introduced me to Will Foster who drew the maps. My greatest debt however, is owed to Aisling Halligan whose patience and skill prepared the text. Rath Dé uirthi.

Arthur Keaveney
University of Kent
July 2004

THE WORLD OF SULLA

On a day in 88,¹ a Roman consul, for the first time in history, put himself at the head of his army in order to lead it against Rome. That consul was Lucius Cornelius Sulla. His action, as might be expected, has made him from that day to this a figure of debate and controversy and has provoked a thousand questions. What kind of man was he? Why did he do this? What became of him after? What were the consequences for Rome? These, and other questions, we will attempt to answer in this work. But before we do, it will not, perhaps, be out of place for us to present a brief and, given the nature of our narrative, necessarily somewhat simplified sketch of the world into which Sulla was born.²

After several centuries of steady advance and conquest culminating in the destruction of her greatest rival, Carthage, in 146, Rome, by the time of Sulla's birth, had achieved total mastery of the Mediterranean basin, since such few states in the area as retained their independence did so by her leave. This vast empire was ruled from Rome itself, whence the officials who governed the provinces in her name issued at regular intervals. The complicated constitution of the governing city itself won the praise of the Greek historian Polybius who discerned in it elements of the democracy, the oligarchy and the kingship. Power, in theory, rested with the democratic element, the people. It was they who, in their assemblies, passed all laws and elected the state officials or magistrates. The chief of these magistrates, the two consuls, represented a kind of kingship for Polybius since, although elected for only a year, they possessed, during that period, the very widest powers. The Senate could be seen as the oligarchical component. This body was composed of ex-magistrates and was, in origin, a purely consultative assembly to be summoned by certain of the magistrates when they needed to seek its advice.

In practice, by the time Sulla had come on the scene, the Senate was the dominant organ of government although no ordinance actually sanctioned

this state of affairs. Rather, it had come about largely because the experience which these former magistrates had acquired lent a great deal of weight to their opinion, so that in time it came to have the binding force of a law. This mature counsel was particularly valued in the field of foreign affairs. These had gradually grown in complexity with the development of the empire, so that finally the people were content to delegate their authority over the provinces and their right to deal with foreign powers to the senators. The means by which the Senate maintained its usurped supremacy over the other elements were somewhat as follows. First, no consul would alone defy it, since it had the power to assign him his province and, if he acted contrary to its wishes, then it could ensure he received a profitless assignment. In addition, as magistrates were, in most cases, already members of the Senate they would not want to risk antagonising their peers by untimely displays of independence. Such displays might very easily result in obstacles appearing in the way of their further advancement. So far as the assemblies were concerned scholars have drawn attention to various devices available to the aristocracy which enabled them to keep control. Many of the people had economic and social ties with the aristocracy and the latter also controlled the state religion which might be deployed to their advantage. Above all, however, the people, most of the time did not deviate from a kind of ingrained deference to those whom they looked upon as their betters.³

We must not, however, think of the Senate as a solid monolithic block. Within it there was a group which could clearly be distinguished from the rest of the members. These were the men who were able to boast of numbering a consul among their ancestors and they were, in consequence, styled *nobiles*. With their vast landed estates and their large following of clients, a handful of these noble families, by their power and prestige, controlled the state. But while these families were of one mind about the necessity of maintaining the position of their class as a whole, they agreed on little else. Amongst themselves they engaged in a continuous, and often bitter, competition for the offices and dignities which government could offer. To promote their own interests in these struggles both individuals and families forged, among themselves, political alliances of greater or lesser duration; a man who today invoked an ally's aid and influences would tomorrow be called upon to repay the help thus offered by using his own power to enhance the ally's position.⁴

Such, then, was the state of affairs at the time of Sulla's birth. But even at that stage there had already been set in motion developments which were to threaten the Senate's control of affairs and were to give its leading members something else to think about besides their squabbles with their fellow senators.

Foremost among these developments was what is called the struggle

between the *Optimates* and the *Populares*. A *Popularis* was usually an aristocrat who, proving untrue to his own background, attempted to invoke the people's sovereign power to pass measures unpalatable to the senatorial majority. With becoming modesty that majority, closing ranks before the threat, styled itself the *Optimates* (best men). For most *Populares* the tribunate was the favourite weapon to use in their struggle with their opponents. It had first been so used by the Gracchi, undoubtedly the most famous *Populares* of all, to attempt unacceptable land reform. And, like the Gracchi, many of these popular politicians met a violent end in that intermittent civic violence which, as a result of these struggles, was to plague the republic from now until its end. Often, the *Populares* threw down a challenge to the Senate's control of provincial and foreign policy by galvanising the people into exercising their power in these areas once more. Now, at the behest of a popular tribune, the people were ready to overturn a senatorial decision concerning the allocation of provinces and men like Saturninus did not hesitate to intervene in negotiations with kings such as Mithridates.⁵

If these attacks on the Senate's positions were often severe, they were, at least, intermittent and tended to burn themselves out after a time. A more persistent challenge to senatorial control came from a legacy of C. Gracchus – the politicisation of the *equites* (knights). This class ranked next to the Senate in dignity, and many of its members were involved in banking, money-lending, tax collection and the execution of public contracts. About this time Rome slowly began to develop a system of permanent criminal courts and Gracchus put these courts into the hands of the *equites*. This meant that any senator who offended their interests was liable to be condemned by such a court. Of particular importance was the court which heard cases of *res repetundae* (extortion). Given the type of business the *equites* engaged in, they naturally had a strong interest in exploiting the provinces. Their control of this tribunal meant they could go their way with impunity for it would be a very brave governor indeed who would interfere, knowing that back at Rome he would face a trumped up charge of robbing those he governed, which could send him into exile. So, in this way, too, senatorial control over the provinces was weakened and a characteristic of the period is the sporadic attempts by the Senate to regain control of the courts.⁶

In these ways was the authority of the Senate challenged and its prestige, in the process, dimmed. There was, however, another force at work which did not merely threaten senatorial authority but set fair to destroy Rome itself. This was the so-called 'Italian problem'. Technically Rome stood at the head of an Italian confederacy. This confederacy consisted of a large number of Italian nations who were her allies but in an inferior position to her. About this time these allies began to agitate for equality of status and demanded to be admitted to full Roman citizenship. Their motives for

making such a request were various. In the first place, as they supplied a large part of Rome's armies they could see no reason why, after bearing the burdens, they should not share fully in the fruits of conquest. Further, these very wars had heightened their consciousness of their own worth. Abroad the provincials acknowledged them as lords and masters; it was all the more galling, therefore, to return home to become inferiors once more. And this heightened consciousness could ill brook the increasing high-handedness, and often downright brutality of the Roman magistrates with whom they came in contact. It was the Romans' consistent and stupid refusal (and here Sulla was as guilty as any of his fellow countrymen) to make any concession whatsoever to these allies which led, in the end, to the Social War, when the exasperated Italians finally rebelled and fought, not for citizenship, but for total independence from Rome.⁷

Changes in the army at this time are often assumed as having sinister implications. Marius in 107 had admitted men without property qualifications to the ranks. This, in effect, meant a loosening of loyalty to the state and a greater devotion to the commander. Sulla, it is claimed, exploited Marius' new arrangements to further his own political ends by force of arms. We shall see however that this is false. What Sulla did was not to exploit men's economic standing but to politicise his soldiers.⁸

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