



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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First published 1982
by Croom Helm
This edition published 2005
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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Typeset in Garamond by
HWA Text and Data Management, Tunbridge Wells
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Keaveney, Arthur.

Sulla, the last republican / Arthur Keaveney. – 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Sulla, Lucius Cornelius. 2 Rome–History–Republic, 265–30 B.C.

3. Statesman–Rome–Biography. I. Title.

DG256.7.K42 2005

937'.05'092–dc22

ISBN 0–415–33660–0 (hbk)

ISBN 0–415–33661–9 (pbk)

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

THE EARLY YEARS: 138–105 BC

Of the seven patrician families who belonged to the Cornelian gens, that to which Sulla belonged, although it could boast of one colourful character, was the least distinguished. The earliest member of the family of whom we have a record is P. Cornelius Rufinus, who was dictator in 334, but he is a rather shadowy figure and is for us really little more than a name.¹ The same cannot be said of his son, also called P. Cornelius Rufinus, who was undoubtedly the most celebrated – some would say, rather, notorious – member of the family before Sulla himself. As consul in 290 he played a prominent part in the war against the Samnites. At some time around 285, he, like his father, became dictator and in 277 was consul once more. Here again he gave a good account of himself by waging war against the allies of Pyrrhus, the king of Epirus, who had invaded southern Italy.² In the next year, however, his career came to an abrupt and ignominious end. Such a character could not fail to make enemies among his jealous fellow nobles, who viewed any man's excessive prominence with suspicion, and when Rufinus was found to possess more than 10 *librae* of plate, the maximum allowed by law at the time, they saw to it that he was expelled from the Senate. Ironically, this incident gained for him something he would probably not have won by his substantial military and political achievements: an undying, if somewhat dubious, fame. For centuries afterwards a motley crew of moralists and rhetoricians cited his case to illustrate the primitive simplicity of ancient Roman manners and the severity with which those who offended against them were punished.³ More immediately his disgrace seems to have led to the partial political eclipse of his family. It did not actually vanish from public life, but none of its members reached a position comparable with that of Rufinus, and by the time of Sulla it was regarded as being of little consequence.

A son of the luckless Rufinus, P. Cornelius Sulla, became Flamen Dialis around 250. Although this priesthood brought with it much honour, it was

so hedged round with archaic ritual taboos – every day was a holiday for the Flamen, the Romans said – that its holder was effectively barred from taking any part in politics. This man has one other claim on our attention. He was the first member of the family to bear the name Sulla.⁴ The name, in typical Roman fashion derives from a physical characteristic of the bearer and may be a corruption of the word *sura* (calf of the leg).⁵ Sulla himself was, as we shall shortly see, accounted a handsome man and we may suspect that some of his ancestors, too, had figures which they displayed to universal admiration. On the other hand, the name may be connected with the golden or reddish hair which Sulla himself possessed and which the name Rufinus indicates as being characteristic of the family.⁶ The Flamen's son, also called P. Cornelius Sulla, was praetor in 212 and it was he who, after consulting the Sibylline books, instituted the Ludi Apollinares.⁷ It was no doubt because of this connection with the prophetic books that two mistaken notions arose. It was believed in some quarters that the name Sulla derives from Sibylla and that the praetor of 212 was the first to bear it.⁸ His son, yet another P. Cornelius Sulla, was Sulla's grandfather and he, too, reached the praetorship in 186.⁹ About Sulla's father, L. Cornelius Sulla, we know next to nothing. It has been conjectured that he also held a praetorship, but this cannot be proved. Some indeed go much further than this and suggest that as a promagistrate he served in the east and actually encountered Sulla's future enemy Mithridates. Sadly all of this rests on nothing more than a misunderstanding of an ancient source. Probably the only thing we know for certain about Sulla's father is that he was married twice and his second wife, Sulla's stepmother, was a woman of considerable wealth, a circumstance which was to be of no small importance to the young Sulla.¹⁰

The family, then, into which Sulla was born in 138 had not risen above the praetorship for several generations. Of his childhood we know nothing, since the one story related of it is as false as it is charming. According to this account, while Sulla was still a baby his nurse was carrying him through the streets of Rome one day when she was stopped by a strange woman who said *puer tibi et reipublicae tuae felix* (the infant will be a source of felicity to you and the state). The woman then disappeared and was never seen again. We do know, however, that the family was in reasonably comfortable circumstances, since Sulla received the education normal for a young Roman of his class. He was thoroughly grounded in the Greek and (such as existed at the time) Latin classics and in consequence was imbued with a love of letters which he never lost throughout his life. But some time during his teens, possibly around the time he donned the *toga virilis* Sulla's fortune took a decided turn for the worse. His father died and left him nothing in his will. We cannot say for certain if this was because the two had fallen out

or whether the father had, in fact, nothing to leave, but subsequent events will show that the latter hypothesis is the more likely.¹¹

At any rate, Sulla was reduced to poverty as a result of his father's will. The one detail we know about his circumstances at this time concerns his domestic arrangements. Apparently he rented a ground floor apartment. Above him was a slave who paid only a thousand sesterces less for his quarters.¹² There has been some debate as to what kind of income these details imply. This much can however be safely said. Sulla was never actually reduced to poverty or faced the possibility of starvation.¹³ It does mean, however, that in those circles which mattered in Rome he was nothing. His tiny income might appear impressive when compared with that of a manual worker, but no Roman noble, least of all Sulla himself, who throughout his life manifested a fierce aristocratic pride, would ever dream of making such a comparison. The Roman nobles, who now occupied the places once filled by Sulla's ancestors, would measure the young man's resources against the huge fortunes held by themselves and would account them as being nothing. By the standards of the class to which he rightfully belonged – and, if we are to understand Sulla's position at this time, these are the standards we must apply – Sulla was a very poor man. He was poor in the eyes of the Roman nobility and in his own. His poverty was to play a great part in moulding Sulla's character and forming his outlook.

One vital consequence flowed from this poverty of Sulla's. He could not embark on the only career open to a man of his class, that is he could not enter public life. The amount of his wealth fell short of the equestrian census which meant that he could not perform the compulsory military service imposed on every Roman, in that part of the levy which would qualify him, once his time was finished, to stand for office. In brief, Sulla had become declass . His present status was commensurate neither with his birth, the position of his ancestors nor, as we shall see in the course of this biography, with his own expectations. As another famous Roman remarked later, poverty made you ridiculous, and in a small town like Rome Sulla's plight must have been common knowledge. In a fiercely competitive timocratic society he was branded as the representative of a decayed patrician family who could no longer aspire to the kind of status his ancestors had enjoyed. He had sunk low.¹⁴

In these circumstances, with upper-class Roman doors firmly shut in his face by the pathologically caste-conscious nobility, it was natural that the warm-blooded Sulla, with his strong capacity for forming friendships, should turn to where he would find a welcome: among theatrical folk, a clique generally despised at Rome. They did not care if he had few coins to jingle in his pocket nor did they worry about the number of ancestral portrait busts which adorned his *atrium*.

They welcomed him into their demi-monde for himself alone and the qualities he possessed. And Sulla, with his natural affability and willingness to do anyone a good turn, rapidly found favour with that egalitarian society. With his fine singing voice he played his part to the full at the actors' parties and drinking bouts, and happily swapped witticisms and insults with his free-spoken friends. For these theatrical companions of his Sulla the *littérateur* willingly turned his hand to play-writing. Not surprisingly, considering the company he kept and his own fondness for a good jest, he produced not tragedies but Atellan farces. This particular genre – a species of rough rustic comedy – had hitherto been largely improvised, but now it began to be written down and took on a distinct literary shape of its own. It might, perhaps, be not altogether fanciful to suggest that Sulla's compositions played a part in this development. It certainly says much for Sulla's strong sense of loyalty and his deep-rooted capacity for expressing gratitude that, even when he became great and famous, he did not abandon these theatrical friends of his. During his dictatorship, much to the disgusted outrage of the nobles who surrounded him, he still insisted in seeking out their company as he had done long before in the days of his youth. Indeed, leaving aside all questions of gratitude and loyalty, Sulla's early experiences, and also his experiences throughout much of his later career, do not seem to have given him much love for Roman nobles as persons, whatever he thought of them as agents of government. So we find him, throughout his political life, turning away from their world with its falsehoods and double-dealing to spend his leisure moments relaxing among those who loved him for himself and not for the advancement he could bring them. Years before, his poverty had not troubled them and now they were utterly unconcerned by his titles. They still addressed the master of the world with all the impudence and licence of old, and he responded in a like vein. In an uncertain world they were his truest and frankest friends.¹⁵

While still a very young man Sulla married his first wife. There is some confusion over her name which may have been either *Ilia* or *Julia*. If we assume the latter to be correct then she could have been a sister of the famous orator *Caesar Strabo* and of *L. Julius Caesar* who was to be consul in 90. The *Caesars* had the reputation of making somewhat unusual matches and this one, as will shortly emerge, could have proved to be of some value to Sulla when he finally came to enter politics. One child was born of the marriage, a daughter, who in 89 married the son of *Pompeius Rufus*, Sulla's consular colleague in the next year. Sometime later – we do not know when exactly although *Julia* had presumably died in the meantime – Sulla married again a woman called *Aelia*, of whom we know nothing apart from her name. Having a wife at home did not, however, keep Sulla from extra-marital adventures. He had some kind of homosexual relationship with an

actor, Metrobius, and we also know of a liaison he conducted with a woman older than himself who is known to us only by her *nom de guerre*, Nicopolis. This affair began with Sulla's falling in love with this well-travelled and experienced lady, but, as it progressed, the roles were reversed and she fell under the spell of that charm which Sulla exercised with such facility throughout his life.¹⁶

In fact, this charm of Sulla's seems to have been the characteristic which most impressed his contemporaries, not only those with whom he associated in his youth but also all who later came into contact with him in public life. Under the influence of the myth of the grim and bloody tyrant, which today is almost universally accepted,¹⁷ it is all too easy for us to forget just how attractive Sulla's fellow Romans found this man who won their hearts by his ease of manner and general tractability. Because myths are difficult to shatter we shall be at pains to stress this point during our work. The records of Sulla's deeds remain and it is easy for us to trace them in outline at any rate, but that elusive quality which we may call the warmth of his presence died with him and it obviously requires a certain effort and an exercise of historical imagination to try and recapture something of its flavour. But, having seen now how attractive Sulla could make himself to women and actors, we may perhaps, when the time comes, have less difficulty appreciating the hold he could exercise over nobles like L. Lucullus.

It is, of course, possible to acknowledge the existence of Sulla's charm and still at the same time claim that it was nothing more than an instrument which he wielded with cold-blooded and accurate skill in order to smooth the path before him. On the other hand, there is enough evidence in existence not merely to cast doubt on such an assertion but to positively brand it as superficial and unduly cynical. Were Sulla the charming opportunist this view supposes him to be, would he, for instance, have continued to frequent the company of actors when they could have been of no further use to him? Throughout his life, in fact, he showed this same conspicuous loyalty to his friends and comrades in arms. So proud was he of this that he caused a record of it to be engraved on his tomb. He wished to be remembered as one who had given friend and foe alike their just deserts.¹⁸ All of this would strongly suggest, to say the least, that Sulla's charm and affability were not superficial qualities but had their roots in a personality which was both warm and generous and in a character which had a great capacity for making and keeping friends.

If it is difficult for us now to appreciate the attractiveness of Sulla's personality without making some effort, we are rather more fortunate when it comes to trying to form some idea of his striking physical appearance, which seems to have played no small part in forming the impression he left on men and women alike during his lifetime. It is true that no positively

identified portrait bust or statue survives, but we do possess a coin portrait which depicts a thin face and a nose which could be described as quint-essentially Roman.¹⁹ Our literary evidence suggests that, although Sulla was held to be handsome, his good looks had nothing conventional about them but owed their impact to their arresting unusualness. His hair was golden-red and contrasted strongly with his dead-white face (later to be seared by a traumatic skin condition), which was dominated by blue eyes long remembered as being sharp and masterful.²⁰ Not surprisingly ancient physiognomists soon got to work on this data and produced the kind of analysis their hearers would expect at a time when Sulla's name aroused nothing but universal hatred and loathing. The eyes indicated, they said, that he was a man of courage but rigid and unbending, while the complexion was the result of indulgence in sexual perversions.²¹ In which connection it is of some interest to note that there was also current a story that Sulla had but one testicle, a tale that unfortunately has sometimes been treated with more seriousness than it deserves. Without a doubt it had its origins in some crude but affectionate marching ditty sung by Sulla's own soldiers, who knew full well that their chief was very fond of a jest.²²

Attractive, then, Sulla certainly was, but we may beg leave to wonder if the companions of his youth divined that behind his laughing and mocking exterior there lay a more serious side, and if they guessed at another fundamental trait in his character: his ambition. How much did they know of something which is perfectly plain to us, who can survey the whole of his life: Sulla felt deeply the shame of his present position and it was his firm intention from his earliest days to have a career, and a distinguished one at that, in the world of politics. He was determined to emulate or even outstrip his distinguished ancestors in war and public life, the twin fields of endeavour for a man of his social origins. Despite his poverty and the crippling handicaps it brought, Sulla had made up his mind that all obstacles would be overturned and in his person the glories of the Sullae would be revived so that the family would once more take its rightful place among the ruling elite of the republic. And once he was given an opportunity to realise his ambitions, Sulla pursued his objective with a single-mindedness and dedication which must have surprised those who only knew him as a pleasure-seeker.²³

But that opportunity was slow in coming and Sulla had to suffer his ambitions to be long deferred. It was not until he was approaching thirty that two purely fortuitous events, and not his own efforts, lifted Sulla out of his poverty and enabled him at last to embark on his career. His wealthy stepmother, who doted on him as if he was her own son, died and left him all her money. Then his mistress Nicopolis died as well. She, too, was a woman of means and she also left her property to Sulla.²⁴ Being now reasonably well off, Sulla was able at last to take his proper place in society

and launch himself on that career which befitted a man of his background. In 108 he stood for election and was duly elected to the quaestorship for 107.²⁵ Normally, a young noble was required to perform ten years' military service before he could stand for this, his first public office. By the time of which we speak, however, it seems to have been generally accepted that a man who had done no service might still stand for the quaestorship provided he had reached the minimum age of thirty. It seems to have been thanks to this concession that Sulla, with his complete lack of military experience, was able to stand for election.²⁶ Lots were now drawn to assign the quaestorial duties, and Sulla found himself chosen to serve under the consul Marius in North Africa. Marius was being despatched thither in the expectation that he would succeed where so many others had failed, by putting an end, once and for all, to the war with Jugurtha, a long and sorry business which ultimately had its origins in the wars that Rome had fought Africa against Carthage earlier in the century.

After the Third Punic War the Romans had turned part of the old Carthaginian territory – roughly modern Tunisia – into the province of Africa. To the west of this there lay, in the area now occupied by Algeria, the kingdom of Numidia, whose kings had wisely backed the Romans in the wars against Carthage and had handsomely profited thereby. Further west again was another native kingdom Mauretania which will also play a part in our story. It was in the client kingdom of Numidia, however, that trouble first arose. Micipsa, who had been king since the time of the Third Punic War, died c.118. He left the kingdom to be ruled jointly by his own two sons and by an adopted son, Jugurtha, who was the illegitimate child of his dead brother. He was led to take this rather unusual course by the promptings – perhaps pressure is a better word – of some powerful Roman friends Jugurtha had made while serving with the Roman armies in Spain. Such an arrangement inevitably led first to quarrels and then to open warfare. The upshot was that, despite the Senate's efforts at mediation, Jugurtha succeeded in murdering his two fellow kings and gaining sole control of the whole kingdom. In the process, however, he had overreached himself by allowing his troops to massacre some Italian traders who had supported one of his rivals.

Thus war was duly declared by Rome in 111, but only a short campaign was fought since the Senate was really only interested in making a demonstration. But the subsequent signing of a peace treaty led to a tremendous public outcry at Rome, particularly among the plebs, who suspected that bribery had been used. An inquiry was held into this allegation and Jugurtha, under safe-conduct, came to Rome to testify before the investigating commission. While there, he took the opportunity to murder yet another rival for his crown. His safe-conduct, however, was held to be still good and

he was allowed to return home. The war was then resumed. Its command was entrusted to the consul Albinus, but when he had to return to Rome to preside over the elections his brother Aulus took over. The latter was totally overwhelmed by Jugurtha and the Romans were driven completely out of Numidia. Again, the cry of bribery went up, another commission was appointed and many were condemned. The war was now entrusted to a member of one of Rome's most powerful families, Q. Caecilius Metellus, a man who combined aristocratic hauteur with considerable military ability. In direct contrast with his predecessors, he prosecuted the war with vigour. In 109 he advanced into Numidia and routed Jugurtha in a pitched battle at the river Muthul (Wad Mellag) which, however, led to no decisive result. Metellus, therefore, concentrated on a scorched-earth policy, which was pursued through the winter of 109/108. This policy of ravaging was continued in the next year with such success that in 107 Jugurtha was forced to look for aid from the nomad Gaetuli of the south and from his father-in-law Bocchus, the king of Mauretania. In the meantime, Metellus had quarrelled with his legate Marius. The latter wished to return to Rome to stand for the consulship, but the former was unwilling to let him go. Eventually Marius prevailed and was duly elected consul for 107. By a vote of the people Metellus' command against Jugurtha was then transferred to him.²⁷

It was against this background that Sulla began to serve as quaestor to Marius. He was immediately entrusted with an important task by his commander. In order to deal with the slippery nomads of the desert it was necessary for the Romans to have a large cavalry force at their disposal and so, when the main army set sail for Africa, Sulla was left behind, entrusted with the gathering of such a force in Latium and from among the Italian allies.²⁸ One's immediate reaction to this is to ask what prompted Marius, himself a hardened soldier, to give such an important job to an unknown young man who was totally without military experience and who, having spent his youth largely in the company of actors, had the reputation of being something of a rake? We could, perhaps, answer this question by pointing out that Marius would have to be indulgent, since a superior was expected to treat his quaestor as a father would a son.²⁹ We might also invoke nepotism. Sulla, it will be recalled, may have married a sister of Caesar Strabo and L. Julius Caesar. As it has been suggested that this pair might have been on friendly terms with Marius,³⁰ he could have been willing to do them a good turn by promoting their relative's interests. But there are limits to both paternal affection and to the desire to please one's friends, and they were surely reached here. Starting out for a difficult and dangerous war which had smashed so many reputations to fragments (and on which incidentally he had staked his own), would Marius really entrust such a

vital task to an unknown simply from a sense of duty or because he was friendly with the unknown's brother-in-law? Family connections or a sense of obligation might procure a man a sinecure or lead his chief to take a special interest in him and teach him the business of war by easy stages; they would hardly secure him an important commission straight away. What, then, is the explanation of Marius' behaviour? I would suggest that he picked Sulla for the job simply because he was a sufficiently shrewd judge of military ability to be able to recognise the abundant natural talents which lay beneath his somewhat raffish exterior. If Marius really did make such an assessment, events were soon to prove him right.³¹

Marius began his campaign in 107 by continuing the tactics which his predecessor had employed. He concentrated his energies on capturing and garrisoning as many fortified positions as possible. Jugurtha, for his part, retaliated in true guerrilla fashion by conducting razzias into the territory occupied by the Romans. Only one set battle appears to have taken place – near Cirta (Constantine) – and from this Marius emerged victorious. All this time Bocchus played the equivocator's part. Unwilling to embroil himself openly in conflict with the Romans, he remained quietly in his own kingdom and contented himself with sending soothing and reassuring messages to Marius: he wished only for the friendship of the Roman people who, he said, had nothing to fear from him. He could not avoid sending some help to Jugurtha, but he did not want war with Rome.

Towards the end of the year Jugurtha, for reasons unknown to us, had become inactive and Marius decided in the circumstances to attempt a spectacular coup. Those who had sent him out expected to be dazzled by his achievements but so far his work, though solid, had blinded nobody. It was time to give the public a little of what they wanted. He therefore made a daring march across the desert and captured the strongly fortified town of Capsa (Gafsa). Returning thence he resumed his reduction of strong points until, with the approach of winter, he took up quarters probably near Cirta.³²

By the spring of 106 only some areas in western Numidia were left to Jugurtha. Marius now decided to attack a fortress on the Mulucha (Moulania) which belonged to the prince. Although the fortress lay at some considerable distance from Cirta, Marius nevertheless had good reasons for wanting to attack it. After successfully displaying Roman military might in eastern Numidia, Marius was naturally anxious to do the same in the west, which had been Jugurtha's power-base since the days when Numidia had been divided between him and his ill-fated rivals. He would also, if he were successful, be able to lay his hands on a considerable portion of the king's treasure which was stowed there. Finally, the expedition might do something towards solving the ever-present problem of the dithering Bocchus. The region bordered on Mauretania, and Marius evidently hoped that this display

would forcefully bring home to the king the inadvisability of entangling himself in a conflict with Rome.³³

It was while Marius was engaged in this siege that Sulla arrived with the cavalry force he had raised in Italy.³⁴ He instantly set about making himself popular with the army. That notorious charm of his, which he had hitherto exercised so devastatingly on women and actors, was now turned with equal success on the rough soldiers of the camp. Sulla took the greatest care to treat them with the utmost kindness and affability. He was always ready to do them a favour, even unasked, and was extremely reluctant to look for one in return, preferring instead to keep as many of them as possible obliged to him. Courteous towards even the lowliest and ever ready, as always, to share a jest, he became conspicuous by his willingness to share in the soldiers' labours and hardship. This benign attitude of Sulla's towards the men under his command never altered, and if we bear this steadily in mind, as we survey the rest of his turbulent career, we shall have no difficulty in understanding why they idolised him and were prepared to do his slightest bidding. Yet this wooing of the troops could obviously have been a dangerous business for Sulla. It could so very easily have aroused the jealousy of his fellow officers and the active dislike of the commanding general; he could only too easily have been type-cast as the pushy subordinate who was getting above himself. In the event Sulla seems to have avoided this peril by his prudence and tact. He had the good sense to go about his business in such a way as not to appear to be in competition with either Marius or his fellow officers and was careful to see to it that his efforts did not appear like an attempt to undermine anybody else's position. In this way he not only won great popularity among the troops but also became beloved of Marius, who seems to have been delighted to find him taking to the task of soldiering with such obvious zest and enthusiasm.³⁵

Marius was eventually successful in capturing the fortress and with it Jugurtha's treasure, but he had little reason for self-congratulation. He had certainly succeeded in giving Bocchus a fright, but the result was not what he would have hoped for. Rightly assuming that familial devotion would not be sufficient to bind Bocchus to him, Jugurtha had taken care to establish a party favourable to himself among the king's counsellors and lavished money generously on its members. Now, alarmed by the presence of a Roman army on his borders, Bocchus gave heed to the blandishments of this group and allowed himself to be persuaded to come down openly on his son-in-law's side. The price of his support was fixed at one-third of Jugurtha's kingdom, payable when the war was ended.³⁶ To compound Marius' discomfiture, there also came the news that Jugurtha had managed to recapture Cirta in his rear.³⁷

The Romans now retraced their steps. Winter was approaching and they