

COINAGE AND SULLA'S RETIREMENT*)

Sulla's retirement into private life in 79 BC has provoked numerous explanations, including illness, apathy towards Rome's future and the intended act as a result of the completion of his work. Carcopino's theory¹⁾, that when Sulla intended to become a monarch a combination of Pompey, the Metelli and the remainder of the nobility forced him to abdicate, since he was unwilling to resort to arms again (in order to maintain his position), was criticised by Scullard in his standard history of the period²⁾. Scullard himself suggested that Sulla retired when he thought he simply had done enough, particularly with the increase in the Senate's powers in an attempt to bring about a return to a republican form of government. In the latest work on Sulla Keaveney extends Scullard's point somewhat and feels that Sulla withdrew from Rome because he considered his continued presence would inhibit the workings of the reformed republic, in which the pro-Sullan Q. Catulus was defending his legislation against M. Lepidus³⁾.

All of these explanations are, of course, speculative; hardly a surprise given the existing evidence. Appian (BC 1.103) rather eulogistically states that Sulla voluntarily retired to live at his country estate in Cumae, whilst Plutarch in his *Vita* of Sulla has nothing to say about the actual retirement but is more concerned with gory descriptions of the final stages of Sulla's fatal disease. Although I am uncomfortably aware of merely adding to the speculation, the purpose of this short paper is to put forward another motive for Sulla's retirement, a refinement of the Carcopino theory, which involves both Sulla's coinage and the rôle of the Sullani.

Despite the arguments of David Stockton, that Sulla always intended to resign when he had completed his work and that no external pressures were brought to bear on him⁴⁾, I believe that Sulla was aiming at autocratic power and to rule Rome behind the façade of the Republican constitution, ensured by his control of the new omnipotent senate. At the end of 82 Sulla officially assumed the cognomen *Felix*, saw the confirmation of the *Leges Corneliae* and the erection of a gilded equestrian statue in his honour facing the Rostra, and celebrated a magnificent triumph (App. BC 1.97; Plut. Sulla 34.1–3). As Balsdon states, all of this symbolised the end of a chapter: the conclusion of the war in the east and the suppression

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1) J. Carcopino, *Sylla ou la monarchie manquée* (Paris 1931) 242 f.

2) H. H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero* (London 1977) 86 f.

3) A. Keaveney, *Sulla, The Last Republican* (London 1982), 204 f.; cf. id. *Klio* 65 (1983) 191 f. and 66 (1984) 147 f.

4) David Stockton, in his otherwise excellent 'Sulla, le Monarque malgré Lui', unpublished Oxford lectures in Donald Kagan (ed.), *Problems in Ancient History*, Volume 2; *The Roman World* (New York 1966) 259 f.

of the Marians at home⁵). Sulla was now all-powerful and, correspondingly, as a result of the proscriptions his band of supporters, the Sullani, also exercised an influential rôle in Roman politics⁶).

Sulla's equestrian statue seems to have been the first for any living Roman (at least in Rome), and although the honour was probably tolerated his coinage may well have caused discontent amongst his supporters, perhaps fuelled by the moderate or middle group which had joined him after the fall of Cinna⁷). It was normal practice for coins to bear the images of gods and dead heroes and individuals; so, for example, L. Caesar (cos. 90) coined with head of Venus in c. 104, following Crawford's dating, as Sulla was to do later⁸). However, Sulla went one stage further when his equestrian statue and thus, in effect, his own portrait appeared on his coins whilst he was still alive: see the gold *aureus* which appears on the plate⁹). This particular coin was struck after Sulla's triumphal coins of 82¹⁰), and following Kent it is extremely likely that it was struck not in the east but in Rome itself¹¹). That the coin was struck there rather than in the east illuminates the political implications and significance of this coinage as far as Sulla's motives go.

In effect, Sulla had set himself up as the first emperor of Rome¹²), and the coinage is a direct indication of this. However, his megalomania proved his downfall. In 81 he abdicated his dictatorship, holding the consulship for the following year probably in an effort to preserve the republican façade¹³). He may have intended to hold successive consulships, following the precedent of Marius (104–100), resulting in practice in his control of the state through the Senate. However the over-mighty general had finally over-reached himself; even his cognomen *Felix* smacked of arrogance¹⁴), and whilst both the Senate and people had been unable to resist the *Lex Valeria* an emperor at this time was something that could not be tolerated. Moreover, Sulla was very ill, not only physically but also mentally; who knew what insane course he may choose to follow or laws he may make to the detriment of Rome?¹⁵) Thus the only faction powerful enough at that

5) J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *JRS* 41 (1951) 9 f.; cf. 4.

6) See especially E. Badian, *Waiting for Sulla*, in *Studies in Greek and Roman History* (Oxford 1964), 216 f. with Keaveney, *Sulla* 206 f. and *Klio* 66 (1984) 114–150 especially 138 f.; for example, the Sullani were “destined to dominate the restored republic, in its very early years at least” (146).

7) See, for example, Keaveney, *Klio* 66 (1984) 138 f. There was dissension amongst the members of the group; see below.

8) Balsdon, *op. cit.* 5 f.; cf. M. H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage* vol. 2 (Cambridge 1974), Plate XLVII Numbers 359/1 and 2. Whether Sulla connected Venus with his own good fortunes is another matter entirely. On Sulla's coinage see also Crawford, *NC* 4 (1964) 141 f.

9) Illustrated in J. P. C. Kent, *Roman Coins* (London 1978), Plate 15 Number 51; see below p. 190.

10) See Kent, *ibid.* Plate 15 Number 50 and Crawford, *RRC* vol. 2 Plate XLVII Numbers 367/1 and 2; cf. vol. 1, 80.

11) Kent, *op. cit.* 269; cf. Crawford, *RRC* vol. 1, 80 with n. 1.

12) Cf. Carcopino, *op. cit.* 241 f.

13) Cf. Appian, *BC* 1.103. E. Badian, *RhM* 110 (1967) 178 f. argues for a date of the end of 81 when Sulla gave up *dictatura* and so in 80 he is just consul, although not everyone accepts this dating.

14) See Balsdon, *op. cit.* 1 (citing as a parallel Pompey's *Magnus*); cf. 9 f.

15) On Sulla's illness, probably an advanced stage of syphilis, see T.F. Carney, *PACA* 4 (1961) 64 f.

time to depose him did precisely that. It was the Sullani who forced Sulla from Rome, probably aided by the advanced stages of his disease, allowing him out of loyalty to live out an anticipated short life in the country, well away from Rome. Sulla did not retire: *he was retired*.

Why then bring him back to Rome in 79 for the consular elections for 78? According to Keaveney Sulla retired, having created a group of supporters who would uphold his acta, and expected to play the rôle of the elder statesman, going into Rome only when needed. These particular elections, involving the struggle between Catulus, M. Lepidus and Mam. Lepidus, were an indication of that¹⁶). But even though Sulla had married Scaurus' widow Caecilia by 87 his relations with the Caesars and Catulus seem to have remained close. Although at first sight my suggestion for Sulla's retirement above brings me into conflict with Keaveney, this is not necessarily the case. Sulla still had influence; there was still much political capital to be made out of one's name (just as there is today), and it is plausible that at the first set of elections following his withdrawal from Rome his presence was deemed necessary in view of the Pompey-backed candidate M. Lepidus. The point that I think needs to be emphasized is that Sulla does not appear to be a free agent in returning to Rome; others decided for him that his presence was required, hence his return, and again we see the Sullani at work. The success of M. Lepidus spelt the end of Sulla's usefulness¹⁷), and indeed dissension amongst the ranks of the Sullani quickly followed¹⁸).



16) Keaveney, *Klio* 66 (1984) 147 f. See also Badian, *RhM* 110 (1967) 181.

17) *Contra* Keaveney, *Sulla* 210.

18) Keaveney, *Sulla* 207 and *Klio* 66 (1984) 146 f.; see especially Badian, *Waiting for Sulla* 231 f. on the rôle of the Sullani in the elections.

The purpose of this paper has been to extend the theory of Carcopino and to suggest that Sulla was deliberately ousted from power – and from Rome – by the only group able to do so: his own¹⁹). Such an occurrence was the result of a number of factors, including Sulla's rapidly deteriorating health, but principally the production of coins which not only flouted Roman tradition but also was a visible sign of the autocratic power he dared to hold. In the 70s the Roman state was not yet ready to endure an emperor, as is demonstrated by Sulla's "retirement"; nor was it a little over a quarter of century later when Julius Caesar followed much the same course but was to suffer a more bloody demise.

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19) See Keaveney, Sulla 207 f. for the "split" in Sulla's group which was to challenge his authority.