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Sulla and the Invention of Roman Athens

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Abstract

In 86 BC Sulla sacked Athens. The siege left deep marks in the cityscape and in the literary sources. This article traces a diachronic development in the ancient reception of the sack of Athens in Greek literature, from the first century BC through the second century AD. In earlier authors the siege is presented primarily in a military context, while in later authors the emphasis shifts onto Sulla's destruction of cultural capital. His treatment of Athens comes to be understood as irrational and excessive. I argue that this latter depiction is an anchoring device that roots the new perception of the city during the Empire in the Republican past. In the first two centuries AD Athens increasingly came to be seen as *the* symbol of Greek culture. Plutarch and Pausanias react to this growing Athenocentrism by retrojecting an image of Athens as cultural symbol onto the first century BC.

Keywords

Greek historiography – cultural memory – Plutarch – Pausanias – Sulla – Mithridatic Wars – Athens – anchoring innovation

1 Introduction

In 86 BC Athens was besieged by the Roman general Sulla. Following the outbreak of the First Mithridatic War (89-85 BC) the city had come under the control of rulers who were loyal to the Pontic King. The war between the Romans and Mithridates Eupator arose out of ongoing haggling over influence in the Black Sea region. By the time Sulla landed at Epirus in 87 BC, Eupator was in

control of most of Greece and Asia Minor, where he had ordered the massacre of 100,000 Italians and Romans a year earlier. Sulla proceeded to Athens and sacked the city after a long siege in 86 BC.

In this article I will discuss the reception of Sulla's sack of Athens in Greek literature from the first century BC through the early second century AD. The Greek sources in fact provide by far the most extensive accounts of these events. Specifically, I want to investigate how authors who were themselves (at least) culturally Greek reacted to the destructions in Greece of the first century BC and to the changing roles of Athens and Greece under Roman rule.

I will argue that the depiction of the sack of Athens by Sulla is characterized by a diachronic development, from an early emphasis on the sack as a military event towards an emphasis on Sulla's destruction of cultural capital during and after the siege in later authors. First century BC authors such as Strabo and Diodorus focus on the military necessity of Sulla's deeds and his significant accomplishment in succeeding. Starting with Plutarch, in the late first century AD, accounts of the sack of Athens increasingly emphasize the destruction and theft of cultural capital perpetrated by Sulla and his troops. Furthermore, both Plutarch and Pausanias depict Sulla's treatment of Athens as excessive and even as irrational.

This article suggests that the depiction of the sack of Athens as a moment of excessive cultural destruction serves to anchor the new position held by the city under the Empire, as witnessed by Plutarch and Pausanias, in the Republican past. Already under Augustus Greece was epitomized as a site of culture, but from the late first century AD onwards Athens specifically came to be seen as *the* symbol and beacon of Hellenism. Plutarch and Pausanias react to this growing Athenocentrism by retrojecting an image of Athens as cultural symbol onto the first century BC, whereas earlier sources like Diodorus and Strabo foreground the military importance of Athens for Sulla's campaign.

The changes in the Greek reception of Sulla's sack of Athens over time show once again that historiographers shape the past under the influence of their own present. Plutarch and Pausanias experienced how in the cultural imagination of their time Athens was transformed into a timeless amalgam of Greek history and art. They make sense of this transformation by anachronistically importing it into an earlier period, and thereby giving it an anchor in the story of Athens. This is why in the account of Plutarch and Pausanias Greek culture *as such* was at stake in the siege of Athens.

In recent scholarship the extant accounts of Sulla's sack of Athens have been compared for the purpose of Quellenforschung,¹ but this approach cannot

1 Ruggeri 2006.

fully explain the changes in the reception of Sulla's Greek campaign: even in authors who relied on a common source—Diodorus and Plutarch—the depictions of these events diverge. Additionally, several scholars have recently commented on the evidence for Sulla's siege of Athens in the context of a debate on his over-all reputation, privileging either the earlier or the later sources.² Instead, my emphasis on the development in the presentations of the sack of Athens over time can absorb the conflicting interpretations found in the ancient sources. Because of my interest in providing a diachronic overview of Greek representations of the fall of Athens I have chosen to include short fragments if authors' full accounts were not extant. Although claims about those specific passages are inevitably tentative, together with the sustained narratives from other authors the fragments do provide insight into larger trends over time.

The present article traces the changes in the representation of the fall of Athens and aims to show how historiographers come to terms with the developments of their own time in writing history. In this way my survey of the reactions to Sulla's behavior at Athens in 86 BC sets out to enhance our understanding of how the idea of a 'Roman Athens' was invented and subsequently anchored during the first centuries AD. The article will be structured as follows: I start by briefly summarizing the events of the First Mithridatic War pertaining to Athens and the immediate aftermath of the war; next, I discuss the (ir)rationality of Sulla's siege of Athens, as presented by the Greek sources; in the following section I consider the ancient reports of the looting at Athens by Sulla and his men; the final section looks at the development of the notion of 'Roman Athens' and of Athenocentrism.

2 Sulla's Sack of Athens and the First Mithridatic War

Athens was allied with Rome from the early second century BC onwards,³ and this relationship was still intact at the beginning of the First Mithridatic War. From the beginning of the first century BC Mithridates Eupator had been steadily increasing Pontic territory in the Crimea and in Asia Minor. In 89 BC the Romans incited king Nicomedes of Bithynia to invade Pontus, and war

2 Dowling 2000 argues that Sulla was seen as having clemency in antiquity, focusing on the earlier sources. Thein 2014 and Eckert 2016, 86–102, focusing on the later sources, dispute the notion that Sulla had a reputation for clemency.

3 The nature and the date of the alliance between Rome and Athens are contested. For an overview of the debate see Habicht 1997, 212–213; cf., Kallet-Marx 1995, 200–201.

broke out.⁴ The following year Athens sent Athenion, an Aristotelian philosopher, on an embassy to Mithridates Eupator, and afterwards he was elected hoplite general. His election meant the end of Athens' alliance with Rome.⁵ In 87 BC Mithridates' general Archelaus replaced Athenion with the Athenian Aristion.⁶ Why Athenion was deposed is unclear. Some scholars have even thought Aristion and Athenion to be the same person, but the majority view is now that they ruled Athens in succession.⁷

What reasons the Athenians had to join the side of Mithridates Eupator remains difficult to determine. In Posidonius, Athenion tells the Athenians that Mithridates will release their debts and restore democracy, suggesting that Mithridates found real favor with the Athenians. They may have feared that the Romans were too weak to win the war, while local unrest and dissatisfaction appear to have provided fertile soil for Athenion's appeals as well.⁸ Velleius Paterculus, in an attempt to exonerate the Athenians, writes that they were simply overwhelmed by Mithridates' forces.⁹ Mithridates first sent Pontic troops to Athens in 87 BC, led by Archelaus, to recapture Delos. In the summer of the same year Sulla arrived in Greece. He fought Archelaus in the Piraeus and Aristion in Athens, and in the winter of 87/86 BC he besieged both the city and the Piraeus from Eleusis. The siege caused the Athenians to suffer a severe famine, until finally Sulla stormed Athens in March of 86 BC. After capitulating on the Acropolis, Aristion was captured and later executed. Soon after Archelaus abandoned the Piraeus and the fighting moved to Boeotian territory, where Sulla won two major battles, in Chaeronea and Orchomenus respectively.¹⁰

After more fighting in Asia Minor the First Mithridatic War ended in 85 BC, when Sulla and Eupator signed a treaty at Dardanus. Eupator and the Romans were to fight two more wars (83-82 BC and 73-63 BC), but Athens would not be involved again. After the sack Sulla imposed peace terms on the city and

4 McGing 1986, 86-88; cf., Habicht 1997, 298-300.

5 Posidon. *BNJ* 87 F 36; cf., Habicht 1997, 300-301, *contra* Kallet-Marx 1995, 209-211, who thinks Athens did not commit itself irreversibly to Mithridates until Aristion.

6 Habicht 1997, 305.

7 See e.g. Bugh 1992, 108-123, with a bibliographical overview of the debate at 111 n. 8.

8 Posidon. *BNJ* 87 F 36; cf., Bernhardt 1985, 39-46; Kallet-Marx 1995, 205-212; Habicht 1997, 300-304.

9 Vell. 2.23.5. His view supports the idea that Athens did not really join Mithridates until Aristion (see n. 5).

10 Habicht 1997, 304-314.

pardoned the remaining Athenians.¹¹ His pardon notwithstanding, Athens smarted greatly under Sulla's siege and subsequent capture of the city. Many lives were lost, large parts of the city suffered destruction, and it would be decades before Athens recovered.

3 The (Ir)rationality of Sulla's Siege of Athens

One of the most important and most detailed extant sources for Sulla's siege of Athens is Plutarch's biography of Sulla, included among the *Parallel Lives*. I am not concerned here with Plutarch's over-all evaluation of Sulla,¹² but will focus exclusively on his account of Sulla's behavior at Athens. Plutarch lived more than a century and a half after Sulla, and his sources for this particular life probably included Sulla's own memoirs and earlier historians.¹³ Sulla is paired with Lysander in the *Parallel Lives*, another general who besieged and captured Athens.¹⁴

In the middle of his narration of the siege Plutarch turns to Sulla's motivation for taking Athens. He characterizes Sulla's reasons for wanting to capture Athens as follows (*Sull.* 13.1):¹⁵

δεινὸς γάρ τις ἄρα καὶ ἀπαραίτητος εἶχεν αὐτὸν ἔρως ἐλεῖν τὰς Ἀθήνας, εἴτε ζήλῳ τινὶ πρὸς τὴν πάλαι σκιαμαχοῦντα τῆς πόλεως δόξαν, εἴτε θυμῷ τὰ σκώμματα φέροντα καὶ τὰς βωμολοχίας αἷς αὐτόν τε καὶ τὴν Μετέλλαν ἀπὸ τῶν τειχῶν ἐκάστοτε γεφυρίζων καὶ κατορχούμενος ἐξηρέθιζεν ὁ τύραννος Ἀριστίων ...

Some dreadful and inexorable desire to capture Athens held him, either because he was zealously fighting a shadow, the city's former glory, or because he was taking badly the jokes and buffoonery with which the tyrant

11 Kallet-Marx 1995, 213-219. On Sulla's pardon see Assenmaker 2013, 395-400; Eckert 2016, 98-99.

12 On Plutarch's view of Sulla generally see Keaveney 2005, 131-132; Pelling 2011, 151-152, 208; Thein 2014.

13 *Sulla* 6.8, *passim*. Historians he probably used for *Sulla* include Livy, Posidonius, Strabo, Fenestella, Sallust, and Juba, see Flacelière and Chambry 1971, 218-221; cf., Ruggeri 2006; Dowden 2013; Schettino 2013.

14 Plutarch dwells on this shared element in their lives in the *synkrisis*, *Comp. Lys. Sull.* 5.5. On the pairing see Stadter 1992; Duff 1999, 161-204; Candau Morón 2000.

15 All translations in this article are my own. Numbering for the Plutarch texts follows the Belles Lettres edition.

Aristion had challenged him and Metella, slandering them and dancing triumphantly each time ...

To a modern reader this description may bring to mind the image of Don Quixote fighting the windmills. Plutarch suggests that Sulla is fighting the long shadow cast by the city's former reputation. He badly wants to capture first century BC Athens not for its own sake, but on account of its successes in, presumably, the fifth century BC. The second possible reason Plutarch considers is that insulting jokes from Athens' ruler Aristion had aggravated Sulla:¹⁶ because Aristion offended him, Sulla wants to defeat Athens to get revenge. The cause of Sulla's eagerness to capture the city, in the latter reading, is personal enmity.

The two possible explanations Plutarch offers for Sulla's determination in sacking Athens share that they do *not* refer to the war that is going on between the Romans and Eupator. Plutarch seems to believe that the intensity of Sulla's desire to capture the city is incommensurate with its strategic importance: Athens' military strength does not warrant Sulla's inordinate efforts in capturing the city, and this is why the author starts looking for alternative explanations. Both explanations suggest that Sulla's motivation for capturing Athens is emotional—he is letting his rational judgment be clouded by desire (ἔρως), caused either by competitiveness (ζήλος) or anger (θυμός).¹⁷

It will be useful to connect this passage with a remark that comes earlier in the piece, where Plutarch dwells on the extent of Sulla's operations at Athens. He writes (*Sull.* 12.1-2):

ταῖς δ' Ἀθήναις ... ἄθρους ἐπέστη καὶ τὸν Πειραιᾶ περιλαβὼν ἐπολιόρκει, μηχανὴν τε πᾶσαν ἐφιστάς καὶ μάχας παντοδαπὰς ποιούμενος. καίτοι χρόνον οὐ πολὺν ἀνασχομένῳ παρὴν ἀκινδύνως ἐλεῖν τὴν ἄνω πόλιν, ὑπὸ λιμοῦ συνηγμένην ἤδη τῇ χρεῖα τῶν ἀναγκαίων εἰς τὸν ἔσχατον καιρὸν· ἄλλ' ἐπειγόμενος εἰς Ῥώμην καὶ δεδιὼς τὸν ἐκεῖ νεωτερισμόν, πολλοῖς μὲν κινδύνοις, πολλαῖς δὲ Σμάχαις, μεγάλαις δὲ δαπάναις κατέσπευδε τὸν πόλεμον....

Against Athens Sulla led up all his forces, and encircling the Piraeus he laid siege to it, using every sort of siege-engine and making all kinds of attacks. But if he had waited a little while, it would have been possible to safely capture the upper city, which, afflicted by hunger and a lack of necessities, was already in a most dire situation. Yet, being eager to get back

16 See also *Sull.* 2.2, 6.19, and 6.23 for further mentions of the Athenians insulting Sulla with jokes and songs.

17 On emotions in Plutarch see most recently Opsomer 2013, 95-98.

to Rome and fearing the revolutionary mood there, he tried to rush the war taking many risks, fighting many battles, and incurring great costs.

Plutarch seems to be offering an entirely different explanation here than in 13.1: Sulla carried out the siege of Athens with disproportionate intensity because he wanted to get back to Rome quickly.¹⁸ It is difficult to determine whether Plutarch's analysis of the situation in Athens is correct. Would the city have surrendered if Sulla had waited a little longer? Appian notes that the Athenians were indeed weakened by the famine and easily overcome once Sulla had scaled the walls, but in his account the rationale of this final attack is not questioned at all (*Mith.* 38). It is also worth noting that even after Sulla had stormed the city Aristion and some of his supporters still held out on the Acropolis for a considerable time,¹⁹ casting doubt on Plutarch's view that Aristion was close to surrendering already before the city was finally taken.

I suggest that the three possible reasons Plutarch gives for Sulla's tenacity and fervor in besieging Athens are not mutually exclusive in his account. The common thread that runs through all three scenarios is Plutarch's conviction that on military-strategic grounds Sulla need not have spent as much effort, resources, and money on fighting Athens as he did, though he praises Sulla's qualities as a general in the *synkrisis* (4.1, 6-9). The three alternative explanations—Athens' former glory, personal enmity with Aristion, need to return to Rome—all forego the possibility that capturing Athens might have been of essential strategic importance in the context of the war with Eupator, and that doing so might have been difficult because of the strength of the city. Modern historians subscribe to the latter scenario and are puzzled by Plutarch's analysis.²⁰ The result of Plutarch's inquiry into Sulla's motivation is that Athens is portrayed as an insignificant adversary, not worthy, in a military sense, of the money, force, and time expended by the Romans to defeat her.

The sack of Athens is approached very differently in accounts of the events that were written prior to Plutarch's lifetime, in the first century BC. The earlier

18 Plutarch's later contemporary Florus also mentions Sulla's haste during his Greek campaign: *et debellatum foret, nisi de Mithridate triumphare cito quam vere maluisset* (*Epit.* 1.40.11). He interprets it differently though: Sulla battled Mithridates *less* not more thoroughly on account of his rush. The authors may have derived Sulla's haste from Livy, but the *Periochae* do not mention Sulla's sack of Athens (only Archelaus' occupation of the city, *Per.* 78). More likely, Sulla's memoirs mention his eagerness to get back to Rome. On Florus using the memoirs see Eckert 2016, 89.

19 Plu. *Sull.* 14.11; App. *Mith.* 39; cf., Habicht 1997, 306; Kallet-Marx 1995, 212-213.

20 Importance of Athens: e.g. McGing 1986, 118-126; Keaveney 2005, 65-75; puzzled by Plutarch: Santangelo 2007, 36.

sources present Sulla's deeds primarily as military acts. Strabo, for instance, frames the battle over Athens first and foremost in the context of the First Mithridatic War (Str. 9.1.20):

ἐπιπεσὼν δ' ὁ Μιθριδατικός πόλεμος τυράννους αὐτοῖς κατέστησεν οὓς ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐβούλετο· τὸν δ' ἰσχύσαντα μάλιστα τὸν Ἀριστίωνα καὶ ταύτην βιασάμενον τὴν πόλιν ἐκ πολιορκίας ἐλὼν Σύλλας, ὁ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμὼν, ἐκόλασε ...

When the Mithridatic War broke out the king placed tyrants over them [the Athenians], whomever he wanted: Aristion was the most powerful of these and he violently oppressed the city. Sulla, the Roman general, punished him after taking the city by siege ...

Sulla's reasons for wanting to capture Athens are not questioned in Strabo's account. Because Mithridates took the city away from the Romans by placing it under Aristion, the Romans needed to recapture the city and Aristion had to be deposed. That Sulla executed this task with considerable force and effort is, for Strabo, self-evident and unproblematic.²¹

The framing of Strabo is mirrored in the fragments of other first century BC historians, whose full accounts of the sack of Athens unfortunately are not extant. One fragment mentioning the fall of Athens comes from Diodorus, who writes (39.6):

Σύλλας γάρ, εἷς ἐκ τῶν ἐχθρῶν ὑπολειφθεὶς, περὶ τὴν Βοιωτίαν τὰς Μιθριδάτου δυνάμεις κατακόψας καὶ τὰς Ἀθήνας ἐκπολιορκήσας, εἴτα Μιθριδάτην σύμμαχον ποιησάμενος καὶ παραλαβὼν αὐτοῦ τὸν στόλον ἐπανήλθεν εἰς τὴν Ἰταλίαν.

Sulla, the only one remaining from the enemies [of Cinna and Marius] destroyed the army of Mithridates in Boeotia, took Athens after a siege, made a treaty with Mithridates, and having taken over his fleet returned to Italy.

²¹ On Strabo's over-all positive evaluation of Sulla see Engels 1999, 316; Dowling 2000, 330; Pretzler 2005, 157; Thein 2014, 183-184. Desideri 2000, 27-36 ascribes anti-Athenian sentiments to Strabo, who wanted to promote his 'own' Asia Minor instead; cf. Engels 2005, 132-133; *contra* Dueck 2000, 79-81.

Diodorus, like Strabo, focuses on the role of Athens in the military conflict between Sulla and Mithridates. The passage, in sharp contrast to Plutarch's account, gives the impression of an efficient and targeted campaign.²²

Other, shorter fragments similarly present Sulla's campaign against Mithridates as efficient and successful. Posidonius, without mentioning the sack of Athens explicitly, describes how Sulla 'cooped up Mithridates at the shores of the Black Sea'.²³ The historian Memnon does mention Athens, again firmly in the context of the war with Pontus: 'On his arrival Sulla occupied some cities which were changing sides of their own accord and others by force, having routed in battle a large Pontic army. He took Athens too.'²⁴ Unlike Plutarch, none of the first century BC authors seem to doubt the necessity of Sulla's siege of Athens and his significant accomplishment in succeeding. While the fragmented state of the evidence from Diodorus, Posidonius, and Memnon precludes a definitive interpretation of the attitudes of these authors, their comments seem more closely aligned with Strabo's view that Sulla's expenditure of means and energy was justified than with Plutarch's criticism.

Accounts of the siege of Athens are also available in two Greek authors writing after Plutarch, but still in the second century AD, and both reflect on his motivations. Appian writes that Sulla ordered the city be destroyed 'because he was angry that they had so suddenly joined the barbarians without cause and had displayed such unrestrained rebelliousness toward himself'.²⁵ Pausanias writes that Sulla 'raged madly against the Greek cities and the gods of the Greeks',²⁶ and that even after the siege he 'did not let go of his anger towards the Athenians'.²⁷ Appian, like Plutarch, characterizes Sulla as being emotionally affected, but he localizes the reason for his anger in the strategic context of the war: because the Athenians went over to the Pontic side and

22 In general, Diodorus presents Sulla as the rightful vanquisher of Marius, cf. Dowling 2000, 319-323.

23 *BNJ* 87 F 37 = *Plu. Mar.* 45.4: Σύλλας δὲ ἐκεῖνος ὁ ... νῦν δὲ Μιθριδάτην συνεσταλκῶς εἰς τὸν Εὐξείνιον Πόντον.

24 *BNJ* 434 F1: ὁ δὲ παραγεγνῶς τῶν πόλεων τὰς μὲν ἐκουσίῳ μεταβαλλομένας, τὰς δὲ καὶ βία κατέσχεν, οὐκ ὀλίγον στράτευμα τῶν Ποντικῶν μάχῃ τρεψάμενος. εἶλε δὲ καὶ τὰς Ἀθήνας. There is no firm date for Memnon: he may have lived as early as the time of Julius Caesar or as late the second century AD, Keaveney and Madden 2011.

25 *Mith.* 38: ὑπ' ὀργῆς ὡς ἐπὶ ταχέϊα δὴ καὶ ἐς βαρβάρους ἀλόγῳ μεταβολῇ καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν ἀκράτῳ φιλονεικίᾳ.

26 9.33.6: τοῦτον μὲν τοιαῦτα ἐς τε Ἑλληνίδας πόλεις καὶ θεοὺς τοὺς Ἑλλήνων ἐκμανέντα.

27 1.20.7: Σύλλου δὲ οὐκ ἀνιέντος ἐς Ἀθηναίους τοῦ θυμοῦ....

rebelled against him Sulla is angry with them.²⁸ Pausanias' interpretation is even closer to Plutarch's, in that he too characterizes Sulla's behavior as irrational, attributing Sulla's acts to an unspecified madness.

In this initial survey of the sources Plutarch's analysis of Sulla's siege of Athens stands out. He explicitly places the motivation for Sulla's fervor outside of the military conflict with Eupator, and he thinks Sulla's efforts were far greater than necessary, which has the effect that Athens is portrayed as an insignificant adversary in the context of the First Mithridatic War. In the first century BC sources, in contrast, no such external motivations are introduced, and the efforts and expenses undertaken by Sulla to capture the city are not questioned. The accounts from Appian and Pausanias, like Plutarch, present Sulla as being affected emotionally, but in the former Athens is a formidable adversary throughout,²⁹ while in Pausanias the city is the powerless victim first of Aristion and then of Sulla.³⁰ Sulla's allegedly irrational zeal for capturing Athens in Plutarch, combined with his unrelenting rage after the siege in Appian and Pausanias puts the events of 86 BC in a particular light: Athens was not 'just' an adversary in the First Mithridatic War, but *had* to have been a special target for Sulla. This notion appears to be absent in the first century BC sources.

Part of the difference in approach between, for instance, Strabo and Plutarch, is due to their choice of genre. As a biographer Plutarch is bound to be more interested in Sulla's emotions than Strabo, who was writing geography. Similarly, Diodorus was interested in universal history, while Pausanias wanted to provide a travel report on Greece. Nonetheless, the strong contrast in how Sulla's sack of Athens is interpreted between the earlier sources and later accounts starting with Plutarch, respectively efficient or extreme, cannot be explained by the constraints of genre alone.

It is clear that Plutarch played a pivotal role in the reception of Sulla's siege. But where did he first get the idea that the siege of Athens was excessive? No more has been transmitted than what is cited above of the sources Plutarch probably used for his description of the fall of Athens, so we cannot answer this question conclusively.³¹ It is possible, though, that orally transmitted eyewitness accounts that perhaps had grown more dramatic over time influenced Plutarch's narrative: when he writes that after the siege the bloodshed 'flooded

28 Cf. App. *BC* 1.77: in a letter to the senate in 86 BC Sulla boasts of his victories over Mithridates.

29 App. *Mith.* 30-37; except for right after the siege, *Mith.* 38.

30 1.20.4-7: the city is defeated with only the smaller part of Sulla's army.

31 On Plutarch's sources, see n. 13.

the suburbs through the [Dipylon] gates' he attributes this to oral reports.³² Further, how Plutarch and his contemporaries perceived the evidence available to them for Sulla's sack of the city also plays an important role. Even if one assumes that, for instance, Strabo and Plutarch largely had the same information about the events of 86 BC, Strabo may have viewed Sulla's actions as entirely appropriate in light of the menace of Mithridates. Athens just happened to be the unfortunate victim. But for Plutarch, as I will argue, Athens was of great symbolic importance. Plutarch anachronistically projects this importance onto the events of 86 BC, and in his interpretation the sack of the city becomes an excessive crime that could not and therefore *was* not warranted by military necessity alone, requiring alternative motivations on the part of Sulla instead.

4 Looting Athens, Looting Greece

In addition to the shift in the way Sulla's strategy in Athens is depicted, another difference between the first century BC and the first and second century AD accounts is that in the latter there is a strong emphasis on the destruction and pillaging of Greek artifacts during the siege, which is absent in the former. The result of this emphasis, I will suggest, is that the city is again depicted as a special type of adversary. Its role as *the* center of culture of Greece and of the world is brought sharply into focus, while its military power is downplayed and placed in the background. In my discussion of cultural destruction at Athens during the war I focus on three locations: the Academy and the Lyceum, the Odeion, and the library of Apellicon.

Plutarch writes that during the siege of Athens Sulla destroyed both the Lyceum and the Academy. He is the first extant author to mention this particular event (*Sull.* 12.3):

ἐπεχείρησε τοῖς ἱεροῖς ἄλσεσι, καὶ τὴν τ' Ἀκαδημειαν ἔκειρε δενδροφορωτάτην προαστείων οὖσαν καὶ τὸ Λύκειον.

32 *Sull.* 14.5-6: ὁ περὶ τὴν ἀγορὰν φόνος ἐπέσχε πάντα τὸν ἐντὸς τοῦ Διπύλου Κεραμεικόν· πολλοῖς δὲ λέγεται καὶ διὰ πυλῶν κατακλύσαι τὸ προάστειον. When Plutarch uses λέγεται without naming a source or sources, he generally refers to information from the anecdotal, oral tradition about his subject, which he may have obtained first hand or mediated through written sources; the phrase need not imply skepticism, cf. Cook 2001.

He laid his hands on the sacred groves, and he cut down the Academy, because of the suburbs it had the most trees, and the Lyceum too.

Sulla cut down the trees of the Academy and of the Lyceum, because he needed wood to build siege-engines. As the hallowed grounds of Greek philosophy both places would have carried a special meaning for Plutarch, and the trees of the Academy had a religious significance as well.³³ Appian, who probably wrote shortly after Plutarch, also records that Sulla ordered the chopping down of trees in the Academy for building siege engines, but he does not mention the Lyceum.³⁴

In contrast to other destructions dating to the siege of Athens, such as the collapse of the Pompeion in the Ceramicus, the damage to the Academy and the Lyceum have not, to the best of my knowledge, been corroborated by archaeological finds,³⁵ but this of course need not disqualify the remarks in Plutarch and Appian. More puzzling, however, is the fact that Strabo is silent on any damage done to the Lyceum or Academy by Sulla. He includes both places as examples of Athenian landmarks rich in history and myth without indicating in any way that these places suffered harm recently (9.1.17). For Strabo's omission of damage in the Academy or Lyceum, and for Appian's omission of damage in the Lyceum several explanations seem to present themselves. Either the authors intentionally do not discuss (part of) this particular destruction, even if it was evident and well known.³⁶ Or perhaps the destruction in these areas was less severe than Plutarch has led scholars to believe,³⁷ and Strabo and Appian (partially) omit it because they did not think it was worth mentioning. Alternatively, Plutarch may have relied on a source that invented or exaggerated the damage. In the absence of clear archeological evidence we cannot decide what the better explanation would be for these omissions, but we do know that Plutarch consciously chose to include Sullan destructions in both the Lyceum and the Academy.

33 The trees of the Academy were thought to be related to the sacred olive-tree on the Acropolis: Hdt. 8.55; Paus. 1.27.2, 1.30.2.

34 *Mith.* 30: ὕλην δὲ τῆς Ἀκαδημείας ἔκοπτε, καὶ μηχανὰς εἰργάζετο μέγιστας.

35 On the Lyceum see Camp 2001, 267–268, on the Academy see Caruso 2013.

36 Similarly, in the opening of the last book of his *De fin.*, which is set in 79 BC and takes place in the Academy, Cicero omits any reference to the destruction that would have taken place there just a few years prior. Eckert 2016, 99–100 attributes this omission to the taboo status among Romans of Sulla's capture of Athens. Connolly (forthc.) argues that Cicero wants to recreate the Academy as an idealized, pacified place.

37 See e.g., Hoff 1997; Mango 2010, 119, 122; Eckert 2016, 96–97.

A second site of Sullan destruction in Athens mentioned by our authors is Pericles' Odeion. In this case there is a remarkable disagreement between Appian and Pausanias. Appian writes that Aristion and the Athenians burnt the Odeion themselves, to prevent Sulla from using the timber for war machines (*Mith.* 38). Pausanias tells a rather different story (1.20.4):

ἔστι δὲ πλησίον τοῦ τε ἱεροῦ τοῦ Διονύσου καὶ τοῦ θεάτρου κατασκευάσμα,
ποιηθῆναι δὲ τῆς σκηνῆς αὐτὸ ἐς μίμησιν τῆς Ξέρξου λέγεται· ἐποιήθη δὲ καὶ
δεύτερον, τὸ γὰρ ἀρχαῖον στρατηγὸς Ῥωμαίων ἐνέπρησε Σύλλας Ἀθήνας ἐλὼν.

Close to the temple of Dionysus and the theater there is a structure that is said to have been made to imitate the tent of Xerxes: a second one has been made though, because the Roman general Sulla burnt the old one when he took Athens.

Pericles' Odeion was modeled on Xerxes' tent, so Appian and Pausanias *are* talking about the same structure.³⁸ Strabo, again, mentions the Odeion without mentioning the damage it suffered (9.1.17).³⁹ Modern scholars generally side with Appian on this question, assuming that Aristion was responsible for the burning of Pericles' Odeion.⁴⁰ Why, then, does Pausanias attribute this instance of destruction to Sulla? Arafat and Assenmaker have both suggested that Pausanias may have blamed the burning of the Odeion on Sulla because it fits well with the author's over-all negative representation of him, in particular with regards to looting and ravaging in Greece.⁴¹ There are several other examples of Sulla as a destroyer or thief in Pausanias that would support this interpretation.⁴² I agree with their view, and I would add that it fits not only with Pausanias' depiction of Sulla, but also with the larger trend of foregrounding Sulla's destruction of sites of culture during the siege of Athens in 86 BC in Greek authors of the first two centuries AD.

One instance of looting by Sulla at Athens has had a particularly enduring resonance in the sources: his theft of the library of Apellicon. This library, of

38 Plu. *Per.* 13.5-6, cf., Camp 2001, 100-101.

39 The structure may have been rebuilt already by Strabo's lifetime. Ariobarzanes II of Cappadocia, who ruled from 65 to 52 BC, paid for its reconstruction, see IG II² 3426 and Vitruv. 5.9.1.

40 E.g. Camp 2001, 185; Hoff 1997, 37, 41.

41 Arafat 1996, 101; Assenmaker 2013, 400-401.

42 9.33.6: Alalcomenae; 9.7.5-6: Thebes; 9.30.1: Orchomenus; 10.21.5-6: Stoa of Zeus Eleutherius. On Sulla as plunderer in Pausanias see also Miles 2008, 93-94.

course, is famous for (perhaps) having contained the works of Aristotle. Strabo is the first to connect the library to Sulla, who, he says, took the books right after Apellicon died.⁴³ Plutarch describes this particular event as follows (*Sull.* 26.1):

... ἐξείλεν ἑαυτῷ τὴν Ἀπελλικῶνος τοῦ Τηίου βιβλιοθήκην, ἐν ᾗ τὰ πλείστα τῶν Ἀριστοτέλους καὶ Θεοφράστου βιβλίων ἦν....

He took for himself the library of Apellicon of Teos, which contained most of the books of Aristotle and Theophrastus.

In comparison to Strabo, Plutarch omits the fact that Apellicon was already dead at the time, and he has added the phrase ‘for himself’.⁴⁴ With this addition Plutarch seems to want to emphasize Sulla’s rapacity.⁴⁵

Two later authors return to the topic of Apellicon’s library. They may, of course, have borrowed the topic from Plutarch, but it seems likely that Sulla’s theft of Apellicon’s library was part of popular lore. In the piece *The ignorant book collector* the second century AD author Lucian sarcastically advises this kind of man as follows (4):

κατὰ δὴ ταῦτα, ἐκεῖνα ἔχε συλλαβὼν τὰ τοῦ Δημοσθένους ὅσα τῇ χειρὶ τῇ αὐτοῦ ὁ ῥήτωρ ἔγραψε, καὶ τὰ τοῦ Θουκυδίδου ὅσα παρὰ τοῦ Δημοσθένους καὶ αὐτὰ ὀκτάκις μεταγεγραμμένα εὗρέθη, καὶ ὅλως ἅπαντα ἐκεῖνα ὅσα ὁ Σύλλας Ἀθήνηθεν εἰς Ἰταλίαν ἐξέπεμψε....

Along the same lines, go ahead, have those books of Demosthenes, the ones the orator wrote in his own hand, and the Thucydides volumes written also by Demosthenes—he copied them eight times—that have been found, and all the books that Sulla sent from Athens to Italy!

43 13.1.54: εὐθύς γὰρ μετὰ τὴν Ἀπελλικῶντος τελευτὴν Σύλλας ἦρε τὴν Ἀπελλικῶντος βιβλιοθήκην ὁ τὰς Ἀθῆνας ἐλὼν.

44 Plutarch places the transfer of the library some time after the siege of Athens (cf. Santangelo 2007, 215). From Strabo’s mention we cannot tell whether he believes the library was brought to Rome right after the siege or later. There is no other indication of when Apellicon died: Posidonius writes that he escaped after his failure at Delos in 88 BC (*BNJ* 87 F 36 5.53, cf., Bugh 1992, 121–123; Lindsay 1997, 293); in 88/87 BC he was one of the two magistrates in charge of the mint (Habicht 1997, 103).

45 Compare Plutarch’s comment about Aemilius Paullus, who takes nothing for himself, but allows his sons to have Perseus’ books, *Aemilius* 28.11, cf., Bremer 2005, 260.

In this piece an uneducated tycoon is made fun of who wants to own famous, rare books, regardless of their content, and who is likely to fall prey to sellers peddling fake copies.⁴⁶ Sulla's theft of Apellicon's library was sufficiently well known in the second century AD to be used as a joke without any further explanation. The only other time Lucian mentions Sulla is to charge him with stealing a painting by the famous artist Zeuxis from Athens, which was subsequently lost in a shipwreck (*Zeux.* 3).⁴⁷ These two mentions show that in Lucian the only things that are remembered about Sulla's siege of Athens are his (alleged) thefts of iconic items of Greek culture: a painting by Zeuxis and the books of Aristotle.

Roughly half a century later, finally, the Roman author Aelian, who wrote in Greek, mentions a saying that appears to canonize the theft of Apellicon's library. The saying takes the form of two questions (fr. 53):

τί γάρ δὴ δελφῖνι καὶ βοῖ φασιν κοινὸν εἶναι, Σύλλα τε καὶ φιλοσόφοις;

For what do a dolphin and an ox have in common, they say, and what Sulla and the philosophers?

FR. 53

The anticipated answer is 'nothing'. The phrase is very likely a reference to Apellicon's library⁴⁸ and ridicules Sulla not only for taking the books, but also for not being able to appreciate their contents.⁴⁹ The fact that, according to

46 Cf. Johnson 2010, 167. The Greek of this passage is difficult; I have chosen to translate 'copied eight times' which underlines the gullibility of the collector, instead of 'into eight volumes' as suggested by Johnson.

47 Pretzler 2009 has argued that this painting probably never existed; *contra* Miles 2008, 24.

48 Cf. Hopkinson 2008, 123-124. Hercher has connected this particular fragment from Aelian, preserved in the Suda, to other Aelian fragments mentioning Sulla's theft of the statue of Athena from Alalcomenae (cf. Paus. 9.33.6), his cognomen Felix, and the miserable lice disease that ended his life, Hercher 53 = Domingo Forasté 56a-f. The first of the two questions occurs elsewhere in Aelian, at NA 14.25, where the implied answer is again 'nothing', cf. Tosi 2010, 1018 no. 1372. Eckert 2016, 3-4 has interpreted the saying as referring to Sulla's lice disease, but she does not take into account the parallel in NA.

49 Sulla's alleged lack of sophistication seems already implicit in Plutarch's mention of the library. Also, at 13.4 Sulla rebuffs a peace embassy recalling the glories of Athens' mythical and historical past, saying that he 'was not sent to Athens by the Romans for learning history'. Yet, at 13.1 (see above) and 14.5 Sulla does seem to value Greek culture, cf., Arafat 1996, 88, and see Sal. *Jug.* 95.3 for Sulla's good knowledge of Greek literature. Thein 2014, 181 has explained the contrast by suggesting that in Plutarch Sulla "learns to become a

Aelian, this phrase was a popular saying shows that Sulla's siege of Athens came to be remembered primarily as a looting expedition not only in Greek literature but also in (Greek) oral traditions.⁵⁰ This trend continues in the Suda: in the entry about Sulla his taking Apellicon's books is the *only* thing mentioned about the capture of Athens (σ 1337).

When comparing the first century BC accounts of the First Mithridatic War of Strabo and Diodorus with the accounts of the same events by Plutarch and Pausanias, the emphasis on Sulla's thefts and destructions of important cultural sites and of cultural and religious objects appears to increase over time. Instances of damage included in the first and second century AD texts are simply not mentioned by the earlier extant sources, such as the destruction in the Academy and the Lyceum and the burning of Pericles' Odeion. If earlier sources do mention these instances of theft or damage to cultural capital they seem to do so in a less condemnatory tone, as is the case with the theft of Apellicon's library.⁵¹

These discrepancies need not (all) be attributed to exaggeration of the severity of Sulla's deeds on the part of Plutarch and Pausanias, the case of Pericles' Odeion being a likely exception. Rather, these authors foreground the cultural destruction that happened during the fall of Athens in 86 BC on account of their perception of the city, which was shaped, in turn, by the developments of their lifetime. As I will argue in the next and final section of this article, from the late first century AD onwards Athens came to be imagined as a quasi-museum of Greek culture and history. Plutarch and Pausanias have to adjust to this newly invented central but also limiting role for the city. By emphasizing the cultural destruction wrought by Sulla they incorporate the new role of the city in their respective historiographical narratives of the events of 86 BC. The emphasis on Sulla's activities as a looter in Plutarch and Pausanias had a strong influence on subsequent generations: by the time of Lucian and Aelian his looting of Athens appears to be the only thing he is remembered for by Greek authors.

philhellene". They may well be right, but the subsequent Greek tradition on Sulla appears to ignore Sulla's progress.

50 Aelian was a Roman by birth (*VH* 2.38), but he presented himself as a sophist of the Greek-speaking tradition. It is likely that his knowledge of this saying about Sulla derived from his interactions with Greek intellectuals.

51 I have omitted discussion of Sulla's thefts from the sanctuaries at Delphi, Olympia, and Epidauros, because these occurred outside of Athens. The events are described at some length in Diodorus 38-39.7 and Plutarch 12.5-10, and briefly in Pausanias 9.7.5-6. See Ruggeri 2006, 320-322 for a detailed comparison of the two passages with regards to their sources.

5 The Invention of Roman Athens

The case for a defining role of Hellenism in shaping the cultural world of the Roman Empire has been made repeatedly and convincingly,⁵² and the same is true for the widespread Roman appropriation of Greek culture already under the Republic.⁵³ Connolly has phrased eloquently how essential Hellenism was for Roman imperial ideology: “Universal, globally appealing Hellenism mapped itself as the intellectual and ideological system for universal and globalizing (if not globally appealing) Roman empire.”⁵⁴ In the ‘history’ of Hellenism Athens plays an important role from the start. The scholars and poets working from Alexandria and Pergamum after the death of Alexander placed Athenian literature and culture on a pedestal, and in doing so they were, in a way, renewing the Athenians’ own attempts at an Athenocentric Greece under Pericles.⁵⁵ The time of Plutarch and Pausanias, the late first and second century AD, is a particularly important period in the development of Athenocentric Hellenism for two reasons. On the one hand Athens itself *as a place*, not just Athenian cultural production, comes to play a central role in the way Greece is imagined; on the other hand, the cultural movement of the Second Sophistic in the Roman East develops its own version of Hellenism, of which both the Athenian, Atticizing dialect and the imagined space of classical Athens are key ingredients.

At the very end of Plutarch’s life, Hadrian, the philhellene emperor, came to power. The two may even have met.⁵⁶ Hadrian displayed particular favor to Athens in several ways,⁵⁷ culminating in the creation of the Panhellenion around 130 AD, about ten years after Plutarch’s death. If Augustus used Athens as a stage on which to display his version of Hellenism,⁵⁸ Hadrian made Athens the arbiter and very seat of his. Lamberton has argued that through the Panhellenion Hadrian finally brought the age-old project of Athenocentrism to completion: “Athens as the seat of the Panhellenion *became* the center of the Greek world ... because Hadrian ... had rethought the concept of Greekness and the history of the Greek world, and placed Athens in a position within that

52 Oliver 1981 (on emperors and Athens); Woolf 1994, 2006; Connolly 2007; Spawforth 2012 (on Augustus and Hadrian vis-à-vis Greece).

53 Rawson 1985, 3-18; Ferrary 1988, esp. part three; Gruen 1992.

54 Connolly 2007, 31.

55 Lamberton 1997, 153-154; cf. Connolly 2007, 29.

56 Swain 1991; cf. Stadter 2013, 20-21.

57 On Hadrian and Athens see Grainger 1934; Boatwright 2000, 144-157.

58 Cf. Spawforth 2012, 59-86.

world closely analogous to the position of Rome in the *imperium totis orbis*.⁵⁹ The author argues that Hadrian was influenced by Plutarch's work when he appointed Athens as the seat of the Panhellenion, because in the *Parallel Lives* many Athenian men of action are paired with Roman counterparts. In this way, argues Lamberton, Plutarch projected Athens as a center (almost) analogous to Rome, elevating it to an exclusive position of supremacy in the Greek East.⁶⁰

The scenario sketched by Lamberton is perhaps somewhat over determined: scholars have doubted whether Hadrian himself took the first initiative for the creation of the Panhellenion,⁶¹ and Lamberton may well be overstating Plutarch's influence. It appears more likely that Plutarch was reacting and contributing to an already emerging central position for Athens in the discourse about Hellenism of his day, which after his lifetime led to the creation of the Panhellenion. One of his contributions, then, was to anchor in the past the centrality of Athens that was to be affirmed and expanded under Hadrian, by elevating and altering the city's position in the *Lives*. Plutarch's representation of Athens in the First Mithridatic War is a specific example of this practice of anchoring. As Athens was starting to become the focal point of Roman Hellenism in his lifetime, the sack of the city, even if it took place almost two centuries earlier, took on a new significance. Plutarch's emphasis on the cultural destruction wrought by Sulla and his depiction of first century BC Athens as a cultural symbol that it had yet to become are ways in which he roots Athens' new and emerging role as beacon of Greece in the Republican past.

The creation of the Panhellenion and other innovations at Athens under Hadrian had a strong positive influence on the position of Athens, economically and politically.⁶² At the time of Pausanias Athens had in fact become all but an on-site museum.⁶³ Like Plutarch, Pausanias anchors the image of Athens of his own day in the first century BC history of the city. In his account of Sulla's sack of the city he emphasizes the looting and damage to cultural sites and artifacts that took place, because for him Athens, as a site, embodies the all-important cultural achievements of classical Greece.⁶⁴ Scholars

59 Lamberton 1997, 154.

60 Ibid. 156-157.

61 Jones 1996 takes the view that the Greek cities themselves were in large part responsible for the creation of the Panhellenion; *contra* Romeo 2002; Buraselis 2006, 51-53.

62 Boatwright 2000, 83-107, 147-150.

63 Hutton 2005, 38-39.

64 Pretzler 2005; 2007, 142-153. The study on Pausanias and Athens announced by Akujärvi 2005, 251 n. 71 has unfortunately not yet appeared. For Pausanias and Hellenism generally see Habicht 1985, 95-116; Arafat 1996, 43-79; Hutton 2005, 30-53.

have noted that for the earlier authors I discussed in this article, Strabo and Diodorus,⁶⁵ Athens does not yet occupy the special, hallowed place it comes to inhabit for Plutarch and Pausanias. For authors of the late first century BC the sack of Athens is not yet about Greek culture as such, while from the late first century AD onwards it is.

Athenocentrism was not only a feature of Roman philhellenism; it was also a prominent element in the cultural movement often referred to as the Second Sophistic. Epideictic (display) oratory, the preferred genre of representatives of this movement, was greatly preoccupied with classical Greece.⁶⁶ This phenomenon has been understood as a complex reaction to and adaption of Roman Hellenism on the part of the cultural elites of the cities of the Roman East.⁶⁷ In the Second Sophistic Athens played an outsized role: the city had almost become a fantasy city, where philosophers, heroes, statesmen, and poets of various generations commune with one another. I suggest that this rhetorical, classicizing version of Athens has influenced the way in which Plutarch and Pausanias portray Athens of the first century BC as well. By bringing historical Athens as they are describing it closer to the Athens of the rhetorical imagination, these authors are connecting themselves with the cultural trends of their day. They are anchoring their own literary efforts—historiography and *periegesis* respectively—in the dominant literary form of the early Empire: oratory.⁶⁸

Appian, in contrast, did not follow the Hellenizing, classicizing, or Atticizing trends of the Second Sophistic, perhaps because of his Macedonian background as an Alexandrian.⁶⁹ Although he writes after Plutarch, unlike him and other second century AD authors, Appian does not emphasize the looting that took place after the siege of Athens,⁷⁰ and, as mentioned, Appian has Aristion, not Sulla burn the Odeion of Pericles. He does not portray Sulla as a looter or

65 Strabo: Pretzler 2005 (on Strabo and Athens see also n. 21 above); Diodorus: Schmitz 2011. Though at D.S. 13.27.1 there is awareness of Athens as center of cultural production, this passage, set in the fifth century BC, echoes Periclean Athenocentrism rather than understanding Athens as a place as a cultural symbol; for the distinction see above.

66 Bowie 1970.

67 Woolf 1994; Whitmarsh 2001a, 41–89; 2001b; 2005, 66–70; Connolly 2007.

68 At *Praec. ger. reip.* 814c Plutarch famously criticizes references to Athens' victories in the Persian Wars, but he is talking specifically about political oratory. On Plutarch and the Second Sophistic see Schmitz 2013; for Pausanias see Porter 2001, 63–76; *pace* Auberger 2011, 133–145.

69 Cf. Swain 1996, 248–253; Gowing 2009, 333.

70 Appian omits Sulla's taking treasures from Greece during the war (see n. 51) and only says that money 'was taken' from the Acropolis 'somewhat later' (*Mith.* 39), downplaying Sulla's involvement.

destroyer of cultural capital. While the inherent emphasis on military rather than cultural history in Appian's work can partially account for the differences between his account of the siege and those of Plutarch and Pausanias, his distance from the Second Sophistic movement may have played a role as well.

6 Conclusion

I started this article with Plutarch's puzzling image of Sulla fighting the shadows of classical Athenian glory. Through the representation of Sulla's allegedly irrational zeal for capturing Athens and his unrelenting rage after the siege, Plutarch paints the city as a militarily weak but symbolically highly significant target. This representation stands in contrast to sources from the first century BC, where Sulla's campaign is rational and efficient, and Athens a formidable adversary. In the following section I showed that, by comparison with the first century BC texts, Plutarch, Pausanias, and later authors emphasized one particular feature of the fall of Athens: the looting and destruction of cultural sites and artifacts by Sulla and his soldiers. This emphasis, too, depicts the city as though it was already in the first century BC merely a cultural symbol—if Sulla is primarily a looter of art when he is in Athens, the city must be little more than a museum.

In the late first and early second century AD Athenocentrism (re)emerged, this time as an important component of Roman philhellenism. Authors like Plutarch and Pausanias were confronted with a new status of Athens: Roman Athens came to serve as symbol and beacon of Greek culture. Their response to this new role for Athens was to, perhaps unconsciously, embed it in the history of the city, and in their narratives of the sack of Athens specifically. Anchoring a new concept, in this case a particularly Roman image of Athens, by giving it a past of its own makes it easier to accept and understand this intervention. By making the new seem old it can also start to seem inevitable. Finally, this example of anchoring something new in the past attests once more to the malleability of history.⁷¹

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