

From Village to Empire: An Introduction to the History of Rome

Seminar 2: Sources for later Roman history

Plutarch was a philosopher and biographer of the late first and early second centuries AD. He was well travelled and well read. Plutarch wrote, among a great many other things, a series of biographies of prominent Greeks and Romans. He arranged his biographies in pairs (a Greek and a Roman). The following passages are from his biographies of Marius and Sulla. As you read through each passage, think about where Plutarch has got his material, and about the nature of his sources. Has he used a good source? What problems can you detect in Plutarch's source material? What light do these problems shed upon the nature and purpose of the works Plutarch cites?

Plutarch, *Marius* 25: According to the account of Sulla, who fought in this battle, the troops of Marius were divided between the two wings, with those of Catulus in the centre. Sulla goes on to say that Marius had expected that the main brunt of the fighting would be on the two wings, since in very long battle lines, the centre usually tends to fall back, and that he had arranged the forces in this way so that the whole credit for the victory should go to himself and his soldiers, leaving no share of it to Catulus, who would not even be engaged. Catulus too, we are told, in his defence of his conduct in the battle, said much the same thing and accused Marius of having acted towards him in bad faith.

Plutarch, *Marius* 26: The dust cloud also, by hiding the enemy, helped to improve morale among the Romans. Instead of seeing the whole great mass from a distance they ran forward and had engaged in battle with those immediately opposed to them before the sight of the enormous host could strike terror into them. And they were so tough and well trained that not a single Roman was seen to be short of breath or sweating, in spite of the stifling heat and of the fact that they had come into action at the double. This, they say, is what Catulus wrote himself in commendation of his soldiers.

Plutarch, *Marius* 27: The enemy's personal possession fell into the hands of Marius' soldiers, but the spoils of battle, the standards and trumpets were brought, they say, to the camp of Catulus – which was the main argument used by Catulus to prove that it was he who deserved the credit for the victory.

Plutarch, *Sulla* 5: Sulla now thought that the reputation which he had won in war was sufficient to justify political activities, and therefore at once exchanged military service for public life, offered himself as a candidate for the city praetorship, and was defeated. The responsibility for his defeat, however, he lays upon the populace. They knew, he says, about his friendship with Bocchus, and expected that if he should be made aedile before his praetorship, he would treat them to splendid hunting scenes and combats of Libyan wild beasts, and therefore appointed others to the praetorship, in order to force him into the aedileship. But subsequent events would seem to show that Sulla does not confess the real reason for his failure. For in the following year he obtained the praetorship [he was elected in 93], partly because he was subservient to the people, and partly because he used money to win their support. And so it happened that, during his praetorship, when he angrily told Caesar that he would use his own authority against him, Caesar [n.b. this is *not* Julius Caesar] laughed and said: 'You do well to consider the office your own, for you bought it.'

Suetonius was a biographer and antiquarian of the late first and early second centuries AD. He wrote on a wide range of topics, although most of his output is lost. His most famous extant work is his *On the lives of the Caesars*. The following is from his life of Julius Caesar, and offers a summary of Julius Caesar's literary output. What can we say about Julius Caesar's work? Why might Caesar have written accounts of his campaigns? What other works does Suetonius discuss here? What can we say about these various works? What light does all this shed on Suetonius' approach/methods?

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 56: He left memoirs too of his deeds in the Gallic war and in the civil strife with Pompey; for the author of the Alexandrian, African and Spanish Wars is unknown; some think it was Oppius, others Hirtius, who also supplied the final book of the Gallic War, which Caesar left unwritten. With regard to Caesar's memoirs Cicero, also in the *Brutus*

[262] speaks in the following terms: 'He wrote memoirs which deserve the highest praise; they are naked in their simplicity, straightforward yet graceful, stripped of all rhetorical adornment, as of a garment; but while his purpose was to supply material to others, on which those who wished to write history might draw, he haply gratified silly folk, who will try to use the curling-irons on his narrative, but he has kept men of any sense from touching the subject.' Of these same memoirs Hirtius uses this emphatic language: 'They are so highly rated in the judgment of all men, that he seems to have deprived writers of an opportunity, rather than given them one; yet our admiration for this feat is greater than that of others; for they know how well and faultlessly he wrote, while we know besides how easily and rapidly he finished his task.' Asinius Pollio thinks that they were put together somewhat carelessly and without strict regard for truth; since in many cases Caesar was too ready to believe the accounts which others gave of their actions, and gave a perverted account of his own, either designedly or perhaps from forgetfulness; and he thinks that he intended to rewrite and revise them. He left besides a work in two volumes 'On Analogy,' the same number of 'Speeches criticising Cato,' in addition to a poem, entitled 'The Journey.' He wrote the first of these works while crossing the Alps and returning to his army from Hither Gaul, where he had held the assizes; the second about the time of the battle of Munda, and the third in the course of a twenty-four days' journey from Rome to Further Spain. Some letters of his to the senate are also preserved, and he seems to have been the first to reduce such documents to pages and the form of a note-book, whereas previously consuls and generals sent their reports written right across the sheet. There are also letters of his to Cicero, as well as to his intimates on private affairs, and in the latter, if he had anything confidential to say, he wrote it in cipher, that is, by so changing the order of the letters of the alphabet, that not a word could be made out. If anyone wishes to decipher these, and get at their meaning, he must substitute the fourth letter of the alphabet, namely D, for A, and so with the others. We also have mention of certain writings of his boyhood and early youth, such as the 'Praises of Hercules,' a tragedy 'Oedipus,' and a 'Collection of Apophthegms'; but Augustus forbade the publication of all these minor works in a very brief and frank letter sent to Pompeius Macer, whom he had selected to set his libraries in order.

The following passage is from the histories of Cassius Dio (late second to early third century AD). Dio wrote a history of Rome, from the foundation of the city up to his own day. What does Dio think about Julius Caesar's final aims? What arguments were used to goad Brutus into joining the

conspiracy to murder Caesar? Why might these arguments have been influential?

Cassius Dio 44.11-13.1: Another thing that happened not long after these events proved still more clearly that, although he [Caesar] pretended to shun the title [of king], in reality he desired to assume it. For when he had entered the Forum at the festival of the *Lupercalia* and was sitting on the *rostra* in his gilded chair, adorned with the royal apparel and resplendent in his crown overlaid with gold, Antony with his fellow-priests saluted him as king and binding a diadem upon his head, said: 'The people offer this to you through me'. And Caesar answered: 'Jupiter alone is king of the Romans', and sent the diadem to Jupiter on the Capitol; yet he was not angry, but caused it to be inscribed in the records that he had refused to accept the kingship when offered to him by the people through the consul. It was accordingly suspected that this thing had been deliberately arranged and that he was anxious for the name, but wished to be somehow compelled to take it; consequently the hatred against him was intense. After this certain men at the elections proposed for consuls the tribunes previously mentioned, and they not only privately approached Marcus Brutus and such other persons as were proud-spirited and attempted to persuade them, but also tried to incite them to action publicly. Making the most of his having the same name as the great Brutus who overthrew the Tarquins, they scattered many pamphlets, declaring that he was not truly that man's descendant; for the older Brutus had put to death both his sons, the only ones he had, when they were mere lads, and left no offspring whatever. Nevertheless, the majority pretended to accept such a relationship, in order that Brutus, as a kinsman of that famous man, might be induced to perform deeds as great. They kept continually calling upon him, shouting out 'Brutus, Brutus!' and adding further 'We need a Brutus'. Finally on the statue of the early Brutus they wrote 'Would that thou wert living!' and upon the tribunal of the living Brutus (for he was praetor at the time and this is the name given to the seat on which the praetor sits in judgment) 'Brutus, thou sleepest', and 'Thou art not Brutus'. Now these were the influences that persuaded Brutus to attack Caesar...