

Between Narrative and Interpretation: Writing History in the Ancient World

Unit 8: Sallust

Introduction

C. Sallustius Crispus – best known in English as Sallust – is one of the most important Roman historians. He is also one of the Latin authors that have been read and studied most intensively and from the earliest date. His texts became known during the Renaissance, and his style and the themes he dealt with earned him many admirers, both among people interested in literature and people who had an interest in politics (the two categories, so it happens, often overlapped). Sallust is yet another confirmation to the general rule that, in antiquity, writing history was mainly a business for those who were involved, or had been involved in politics. As he himself confesses at the start of his *Bellum Catilinae*, he had a prominent political career before embarking on historical writing (3.3-4.2, transl. J. C. Rolfe):

When I myself was a young man, my inclinations at first led me, like many another, into public life, and there I encountered many obstacles; for instead of modesty, incorruptibility and honesty, shamelessness, bribery and rapacity held sway. And although my soul, a stranger to evil ways, recoiled from such faults, yet amid so many vices my youthful weakness was led astray and held captive my ambition; for while I took no part in the evil practices of the others, yet the desire for preferment made me the victim of the same ill-repute and jealousy as they.

Accordingly, when my mind found peace after many troubles and perils and I had determined that I must pass what was left of my life aloof from public affairs, it was not my intention to waste my precious leisure in indolence and sloth, nor yet by turning to farming or the chase, to lead a life devoted to slavish employments. On the contrary, I resolved to return to a cherished purpose from which ill-starred ambition had diverted me, and write a history of the Roman people, selecting such portions as seemed to me worthy of record; and I was confirmed in this resolution by the fact that my mind was free from hope, and fear, and partisanship.

Sallust has a clear model in mind, as he is penning his intellectual autobiography: he is looking up to the great precedent set by Thucydides, who

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reached the highest ranks of the Athenian elite, took part in the Peloponnesian War in a leading capacity, and set out to write history after his political disgrace, precisely with an aim to being as lucid and impartial as possible. Unlike Thucydides, Sallust could not claim to have started to collect his material even during his political career; as we will see, he did not choose to deal with contemporary history, but focused on events that had occurred a few decades earlier. The most significant difference, though, is that Sallust's record in politics was much less distinguished, and far more controversial, than Thucydides'.

Sallust and Roman politics

Sallust was born in Amiternum in 86 BC: he was a Roman citizen, thanks to the recent extension of Roman citizenship to the Italian communities south of the Po, but his identity was that of a *municipalis*: he came from a *municipium*, a community of new Roman citizens in the middle of Central Italy, and this Italian background is apparent in much of his historical writing. Like many other ambitious members of the municipal elites, he set out to start a political career in Rome, and he soon became a close associate of Caesar. It was thanks to this political bond that he managed to make his way through the ranks of the Roman magistracy system: he was quaestor in 49 and praetor in 46. Being an associate of Caesar entailed a personal bond of loyalty to the great political leader, but it was also, in Sallust's case, a serious political choice: it entailed a certain hostility to the Senate, and an interest in the role of the people. These themes do echo in Sallust's writings, especially as far as the polemic with the senatorial nobility is concerned: a theme that occurs very prominently especially in the *Bellum Jugurthinum*.

Coming back to the autobiographical statement of Sallust, it is hard to escape the impression that he is not being entirely truthful. His decision to leave politics was not a choice, but the consequence of Caesar's death and of the disrepute he had fallen into after the evidence of his embezzlement during the governorship in Africa had emerged. Quite simply, Sallust did not find a place in the world that emerged from the chaos following the Ides of March, and in the ensuing Civil War. Facing political isolation, but still able to rely on an impressive personal fortune (testified by the *Horti Sallustiani*, one of Rome's greatest gardens, still visible today between the Quirinal

and the Pincio), he embraced historiography. While his contribution to Roman politics had been in so many respects unremarkable, he was to make a huge impact on Roman historiography.

The problem of genre

The factor that probably makes Sallust such an innovative historian is the choice he made about genre. Before him, most of history writing at Rome had taken two forms: on the one hand, the great annalistic compilation, inaugurated by Fabius Pictor and continued down to Sallust's day, in which a portion of the past (more or less recent) was surveyed in detail, with an aim to provide as comprehensive a narrative as possible. On the other hand, political biographies had become increasingly common, at least since the end of the second century BC. In fact, autobiographies were more common than biographies: we know of a number of prominent political figures, from C. Gracchus to Rutilius Rufus and Sulla, who wrote detailed accounts of their lives and deeds. Not long before Sallust started to write history, Caesar's *Commentarii* made their appearance: a new approach to history writing, which blended the need for an official report with the agenda of personal propaganda; the account of an important campaign with an interest in the biography and the personality of its leader.

Before the age of Caesar and Sallust, Roman historiography had barely caught up with the main novelty of Hellenistic historiography: the historical monograph. It was an innovation that dated back to the fourth century BC, and whose emergence can be traced back to works like Xenophon's *Agesilaus*; we know that Polybius wrote a monograph on the conquest of Numantia (133 BC), but we have basically no other evidence for historical monographs at Rome until Sallust's major undertaking.

Sallust is the author of three works: the War with Catiline (*Bellum Catilinae*), the War with Jugurtha (*Bellum Jugurthinum*), and the Histories (*Historiae*). The sequence is important, because it shows a clear pattern of development: it seems that Sallust's first attempt to write history was made on a short monograph on an episode of recent history, which was followed by another, longer monograph on an earlier and more complex episode, which spanned over a number of years. The choice of the

Jugurthine War is significant in several respects, and most notably because Sallust regarded this episode as a defining moment in the history of the decline of the Republic and of the Republican ethos. This decline was studied and discussed more at length in the *Historiae*, which – unlike the two previous monographs – provided a wide-ranging narrative of the political history of Rome from the death of Sulla in 78 to 66 BC.

It is always advisable to read ancient historians paying attention to the historical context they worked in, or indeed, whenever we know something about it, their biography. Sallust was unapologetic about the role that his past played in the making of his historiographical choices; for him, the challenge was to prove that history could be as prestigious and worthy activity as politics, and a considerable part of the introduction of BC was devoted to this issue. The central point of Sallust's vision of Roman history is that the city is paying the price of a serious moral crisis, which is reflected by the behaviour of the political elite: in Sallust's view, writing history and educating the younger generations is precisely the most suitable contribution that a man of his standing can make. The conspiracy initiated by Catiline was a splendidly suitable topic, with its combination of memorable protagonists, high stakes, corruption, ambition, greed, indebtedness. The issues that shaped the Civil War between Caesar and Pompey were all there in the late Sixties, when the conspiracy was formed and unveiled: Sallust realized that, and used the events of 63/62 BC as a vantage point on his own times, and his own generation.

The importance of Catiline

The historical monograph, in the Hellenistic tradition, often had a strong biographical connotation. The subject chosen by Sallust was, again, ideally suited, because of the central role that Catiline played in the whole saga. Immediately after the prologue, Sallust focuses on the perplexing figure of this maverick, and crafts a portrait of extraordinary complexity and forcefulness (5-6, transl. J. C. Rolfe):

Lucius Catiline, scion of a noble family, had great vigour both of mind and body, but an evil and depraved nature. From youth up he revelled in civil wars, murder, pillage,

and political dissension, and amid these he spent his early manhood. His body could endure hunger, cold and want of sleep to an incredible degree; his mind was reckless, cunning, treacherous, capable of any form of pretence or concealment. Covetous of others' possessions, he was prodigal of his own; he was violent in his passions. He possessed a certain amount of eloquence, but little discretion. His disordered mind ever craved the monstrous, incredible, gigantic.

After the domination of Lucius Sulla the man had been seized with a mighty desire of getting control of the government, reckoning little by what manner he should achieve it, provided he made himself supreme. His haughty spirit was goaded more and more every day by poverty and a sense of guilt, both of which he had augmented by the practices of which I have already spoken. He was spurred on, also, by the corruption of the public morals, which were being ruined by two great evils of an opposite character, extravagance and avarice.

This description is a classic example of what literary critics call 'paradoxical portrait': the portrait of a man who has great qualities and tremendous flaws, both present to a significant, and even intimidating extent. The paradoxical character is also a figure of opposites: greed and prodigality, for instance, coexist in the personality of Catiline. In choosing to depict his protagonist in these terms, Sallust was deliberately developing a literary commonplace, but he was also making a point that affected his narrative directly. The world depicted in the conspiracy is a world gone mad, where no serious moral direction or credible political leadership seem available. A figure like Catiline embodies the flaws of his own time better than anyone else. However, Sallust's focus is not narrowly biographical. Catiline's ambition is rooted in a specific episode: the Sullan victory in the Civil War (83-82 BC), which led to the seizure of power on the part of a faction and to a spiral of confiscations and violence that persuaded people like Catiline that there were no boundaries for their ambitions. More generally speaking, the corruption of public morals brought about a climate where Catiline's ambition could find followers. Sallust will make the point on other occasions; by choosing to focus on the consequences of Sulla's victory, he also took the opportunity to define himself as an opponent of the 'optimates' tradition, and a follower of the 'popular' trend of late Republican politics. His connection with Caesar almost naturally placed him in those quarters; the whole framework of his historical discussions shows a consistent critique of the role of the Senate and of the optimate elite in Roman politics.

The modern reader of the BC may be astonished by the length of the opening digression, which ranges from the foundation of Rome to the first century BC and sketches a portrait of its decline, with a strong emphasis on the primacy of moral factors. The account of Catiline's plot starts only in ch. 15, and it does not proceed without interruptions: Sallust provides a narrative of the conspiracy that was attempted two years before the main one; later on, he insists on another digression on the moral decline of Rome. Such liking for prologues and digressions may remind of Thucydides, who often included these moments of analysis as necessary steps of his narrative. But there is another aspect of Sallust's historical writing that seems to have a Thucydidean ascendancy: speeches feature very prominently in Sallust's narrative. As in Thucydides, they provide invaluable opportunities to understand the personality and viewpoint of some historical figures; and they are also a way to give the narrative more depth and insight, and to add other viewpoints to that of the main narrative voice. This becomes especially useful when a character like Catiline, whom Sallust despises so explicitly, is at the forefront. A case in point is offered in 20.2-16 (transl. J. C. Rolfe):

'If I had not already tested your courage and loyalty, in vain would a great opportunity have presented itself; high hopes and power would have been placed in my hands to no purpose, nor would I with the aid of cowards or inconstant hearts grasp at uncertainty in place of certainty. But because I have learned in many and great emergencies that you are brave and faithful to me, my mind has had the courage to set on foot a mighty and glorious enterprise, and also because I perceive that you and I hold the same view of what is good and evil; for agreement in likes and dislikes — this, and this only, is what constitutes true friendship. As to the designs which I have formed, they have already been explained to you all individually. But my resolution is fired more and more every day, when I consider under what conditions we shall live if we do not take steps to emancipate ourselves. For ever since the state fell under the jurisdiction and sway of a few powerful men, it is always to them that kings and potentates are tributary and peoples and nations pay taxes. All the rest of us, energetic, able, nobles and commons, have made up the mob, without influence, without weight, and subservient to those to whom in a free state we should be an object of fear. Because of this, all influence, power, rank, and wealth are in their hands, or wherever they wish them to be; to us they have left danger, defeat, prosecutions, and poverty. How long, pray, will you endure this, brave hearts? Is it not better to die valiantly, than ignominiously to lose our wretched and dishonoured lives after being the sport of others' insolence? Assuredly (I swear it by the faith of gods and men!) victory is within our grasp. We are in the prime of life, we are stout of heart; to them, on the contrary, years and riches have brought utter dotage. We need only to strike; the rest will take care of itself. Pray, what man with the spirit of a man can endure that our tyrants should abound in riches, to squander in building upon the

sea and in levelling mountains, while we lack the means to buy the bare necessities of life? That they should join their palaces by twos or even more, while we have nowhere a hearthstone? They amass paintings, statuary and chased vases, tear down new structures and erect others, in short misuse and torment their wealth in every way; yet, with the utmost extravagance, they cannot get the upper hand of their riches. But we have destitution at home, debt without, present misery and a still more hopeless future; in short, what have we left, save only the wretched breath of life? Awake then! Lo, here, here before your eyes, is the freedom for which you have often longed, and with it riches, honour, and glory; Fortune offers all these things as prizes to the victors. The undertaking itself, the opportunity, the dangers, your need, the splendid spoils of war, speak louder than any words of mine. Use me either as your leader or as a soldier in the ranks; my soul and my body shall be at your service. These very schemes I hope to help you carry out as your consul, unless haply I delude myself and you are content to be slaves rather than to rule.'

It is interesting to note that the rhetoric used by Catiline in this speech recalls the tones of the rhetoric of some representatives of the *populares* that are echoed in other passages of Sallust's work and in other late Republican sources. This may appear surprising in a character like Catiline, who was a former associate of Sulla and a patrician – but it is another symptom of the paradoxical nature of Catiline's character. The importance of speeches in Sallust's historiography can find a number of examples throughout his historical production, and the most striking one may be found in the BC. A critical junction in the history of the conspiracy was the arrest of twelve associates of Catiline after the discovery of the conspiracy, and the ensuing debate in the Senate on their appropriate punishment. It was a very divisive issue, which was debated long after the end of the Catilinarian crisis: the life and career of Cicero, the consul of 63 BC, was marked for good by that event, which provided the legal foundation of his exile a few years later. Sallust did the justice to the importance of the event by staging a debate between two leading figures of the senatorial elite, Julius Caesar and Cato the Younger, who were respectively against and in favour of the execution of the Catilinarians.

The debate (50-53) is an extraordinary piece of historiographical ability, which is loosely based on the lines of the interventions of the two men on the Senate's floor, but is largely determined on the re-elaboration of previous historical models. In typical Thucydidean fashion, Sallust takes the liberty of reshaping the terms of the debate and the structure of the speech in order to let the issues emerge more clearly.

The points of view of Caesar and Cato were based on different ideas of what it took to be a Roman citizen, and on how to contrast a threat to the constitutional order; the personalities of the two men epitomised different models of behaviour and attitude within the Republican elite. Sallust knew how important the role of those two men was in the decades that followed the conspiracy, especially in the Civil War, and used the vantage point of the 63 BC crisis to make a much wider-ranging point (53-54, transl. J. C. Rolfe):

For my own part, as I read and heard of the many illustrious deeds of the Roman people at home and abroad, on land and sea, it chanced that I was seized by a strong desire of finding out what quality in particular had been the foundation of so great exploits. I knew that often with a handful of men they had encountered great armies of the enemy; I was aware that with small resources they had waged wars with mighty kings; also that they had often experienced the cruelty of Fortune; that the Romans had been surpassed by the Greeks in eloquence and by the Gauls in warlike glory. After long reflection I became convinced that it had all been accomplished by the eminent merit of a few citizens; that it was due to them that poverty had triumphed over riches, and a few over a multitude. But after the state had become demoralized by extravagance and sloth, it was the commonwealth in its turn that was enabled by its greatness to sustain the shortcomings of its generals and magistrates, and for a long time, as when mothers are exhausted by child-bearing, no one at all was produced at Rome who was great in merit. But within my own memory there have appeared two men of towering merit, though of diverse character, Marcus Cato and Gaius Caesar. As regards these men, since the occasion has presented itself, it is not my intention to pass them by in silence, or fail to give, to the best of my ability, an account of their disposition and character.

In birth then, in years and in eloquence, they were about equal; in greatness of soul they were evenly matched, and likewise in renown, although the renown of each was different. Caesar was held great because of his benefactions and lavish generosity, Cato for the uprightness of his life. The former became famous for his gentleness and compassion, the austerity of the latter had brought him prestige. Caesar gained glory by giving, helping, and forgiving; Cato by never stooping to bribery. One was a refuge for the unfortunate, the other a scourge for the wicked. The good nature of the one was applauded, the steadfastness of the other. Finally, Caesar had schooled himself to work hard and sleep little, to devote himself to the welfare of his friends and neglect his own, to refuse nothing which was worth the giving. He longed for great power, an army, a new war to give scope for his brilliant merit. Cato, on the contrary, cultivated self-control, propriety, but above all austerity. He did not vie with the rich in riches nor in intrigue with the intriguer, but with the active in good works, with the self-restrained in moderation, with the blameless in integrity. He preferred to be, rather than to seem, virtuous; hence the less he sought fame, the more it pursued him.

Cato won the day, and the Senate endorsed the execution of the Catilinarians. While Sallust's sympathies were undoubtedly with Caesar, he was prepared to recognise the role of his arch-enemy in the decades that led to the fall of the Republic. In fact, Sallust was prepared to recognise even the merits – or at least the motives – of Catiline and his associates. The finale of the monograph portrays the scene of the battlefield of Pistoia, after the defeat and death of Catiline (61):

When the battle was ended it became evident what boldness and resolution had pervaded Catiline's army. For almost every man covered with his body, when life was gone, the position which he had taken when alive at the beginning of the conflict. A few, indeed, in the centre, whom the praetorian cohort had scattered, lay a little apart from the rest, but the wounds even of these were in front. But Catiline was found far in advance of his men amid a heap of slain foemen, still breathing slightly, and showing in his face the indomitable spirit which had animated him when alive. Finally, out of the whole army not a single citizen of free birth was taken during the battle or in flight, showing that all had valued their own lives no more highly than those of their enemies.

But the army of the Roman people gained no joyful nor bloodless victory, for all the most valiant had either fallen in the fight or come off with severe wounds. Many, too, who had gone from the camp to visit the field or to pillage, on turning over the body of the rebels found now a friend, now a guest or kinsman; some also recognized their personal enemies. Thus the whole army was variously affected with sorrow and grief, rejoicing and lamentation.

What we have here is a landscape of destruction and despair; the consequences of a short-lived civil war are displayed before the eyes of the readers, who will of course be familiar with the greater, more devastating civil war that took place in the Forties, between Caesar and Pompey. It is the portrait of a collective defeat, the aftermath of a war that has no victors. Sallust's decision to write historiography was a response to that trauma and that sense of loss. His second work was an attempt to explore the roots of the disaster that he found on the battlefield of Pistoriae: the focus shifted to two generations before Catiline, namely to the last quarter of the second century BC.

The Jugurthine War

From a literary point of view, the *Bellum Jugurthinum* is split between innovation and continuity. On the one hand, it is twice as long as the *Bellum Catilinae*, and it covers a much longer period, thirteen years, which witnessed a very

complex political history. On the other hand, though, it is still a monograph, a work devoted to a specific event, and it shares many formal aspects of its predecessor, such as the frequent digressions, both moral and historical, and the important role that the speeches play within the framework of the narrative. It is hard to avoid the impression, though, that this monograph shows the traces of a much bolder and more confident historian. Sallust chose a more demanding topic, which raised crucial questions on the making of the Roman empire and its historical mission; the central contention of the monograph – which was not in the *Bellum Catilinae* – is that the study of the war against Jugurtha can provide a perfect vantage point on the whole history of the Republic. The narrative deals with a specific period, but its relevance goes far beyond the remit of the history of the late second century, or indeed of the late Republic. D. Levene has rightly argued the monograph on the Jugurthine War is an exercise in the concept of fragment: Sallust's constant point is that a relatively minor episode is the most forceful epitome of the moral decline that the Republic went through.

Sallust developed his account and his critique from an even more explicitly 'democratic' angle than he had done in the *Bellum Catilinae*. The period he chose for his account offered him plenty of opportunities, as it was an age marked by the supremacy of the conservative elite of the Senate, led by the family of the Metelli; the age of the reaction to the reform attempts of the Gracchi in the 130s and in 120s. The famous excursus of ch. 41-42 was a summary of the history of the Republic, which identified the great watershed in the tribunate of the Gracchi (transl. J. C. Rolfe):

Now the institution of parties and factions, with all their attendant evils, originated at Rome a few years before this as the result of peace and of an abundance of everything that mortals prize most highly. For before the destruction of Carthage the people and senate of Rome together governed the republic peacefully and with moderation. There was no strife among the citizens either for glory or for power; fear of the enemy preserved the good morals of the state. But when the minds of the people were relieved of that dread, wantonness and arrogance naturally arose, vices which are fostered by prosperity. Thus the peace for which they had longed in time of adversity, after they had gained it proved to be more cruel and bitter than adversity itself. For the nobles began to abuse their position and the people their liberty, and every man for himself robbed, pillaged, and plundered. Thus the community was split into two parties, and between these the state was torn to pieces.

But the nobles had the more powerful organization, while the strength of the commons was less effective because it was incompact and divided among many. Affairs at home and in the field were managed according to the will of a few men, in whose hands were the treasury, the provinces, public offices, glory and triumphs. The people were burdened with military service and poverty. The generals divided the spoils of war with a few friends. Meanwhile the parents or little children of the soldiers, if they had a powerful neighbour, were driven from their homes. Thus, by the side of power, greed arose, unlimited and unrestrained, violated and devastated everything, respected nothing, and held nothing sacred, until it finally brought about its own downfall. For as soon as nobles were found who preferred true glory to unjust power, the state began to be disturbed and civil dissension to arise like an upheaval of the earth.

For example, when Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, whose forefathers had added greatly to the power of the republic in the Punic and other wars, began to assert the freedom of the commons and expose the crimes of the oligarchs, the nobility, who were guilty, were therefore panic stricken. They accordingly opposed the acts of the Gracchi, now through the allies and the Latin cities and again through the knights, whom the hope of an alliance with the senate had estranged from the commons. And first Tiberius, then a few years later Gaius, who had followed in his brother's footsteps, were slain with the sword, although one was a tribune and the other a commissioner for founding colonies; and with them fell Marcus Fulvius Flaccus. It must be admitted that the Gracchi were so eager for victory that they had not shown a sufficiently moderate spirit; but a good man would prefer to be defeated rather than to triumph over injustice by establishing a bad precedent. The nobles then abused their victory to gratify their passions; they put many men out of the way by the sword or by banishment, and thus rendered themselves for the future rather dreaded than powerful. It is this spirit which has commonly ruined great nations, when one party desires to triumph over another by any and every means and to avenge itself on the vanquished with excessive cruelty. But if I should attempt to speak of the strife of parties and of the gene.

Like Thucydides, Sallust liked to interrupt his narrative with long digressions, which – in his case – were statements both of fact and of method. The digression quoted above clarifies what the real target of Sallust's work was. The inability of the Roman elite to deal with Jugurtha was to a large extent the inability of the Senate to be in charge of a growing empire. The figure of the 'new man' Gaius Marius, the first member of his family to reach the consulship, is regarded with great sympathy by Sallust – who, of course, knew that Marius and Julius Caesar were distant relatives. Let us see a part of the long speech with which Marius presented his candidature to the consulship (85.13-25, transl. J. C. Rolfe):

'Compare me now, fellow citizens, a 'new man' (*hominem novum*), with those haughty nobles. What they know from hearsay and reading, I have either seen with

my own eyes or done with my own hands. What they have learned from books I have learned by service in the field; Think now for yourself whether words or deeds are worth more. They scorn my humble birth, I their worthlessness; I am taunted with my lot in life, they with their infamies. For my part, I believe that all men have one and the same nature, but that the bravest is the best born; and if the fathers of Albinus and Bestia could now be asked whether they would prefer to have me or those men for their descendants, what do you suppose they would reply, if not that they desired to have the best possible children?

‘But if they rightly look down on me, let them also look down on their own forefathers, whose nobility began, as did my own, in manly deeds. They begrudge me my office; then let them begrudge my toil, my honesty, even my dangers, since it was through those that I won the office. In fact, these men, spoiled by pride, live as if they scorned your honours, but seek them as if their own lives were honourable. Surely they are deceived when they look forward with equal confidence to things which are worlds apart, the joys of idleness and the rewards of merit. Even when they speak to you or address the senate, their theme is commonly a eulogy of their ancestors; by recounting the exploits of their forefathers they imagine themselves more glory. The very reverse is true. The more glorious was the life of their ancestors, the more shameful is their own baseness. Assuredly the matter stands thus: the glory of ancestors is, as it were, a light shining upon their posterity, suffering neither their virtues nor their faults to be hidden. Of such glory I acknowledge my poverty, fellow citizens; but — and that is far more glorious — I have done deeds of which I have a right to speak. Now see how unfair those men are; what they demand for themselves because of others' merit they do not allow me as the result of my own, no doubt because I have no family portraits and because mine is a new nobility. And yet surely to be its creator is better than to have inherited and disgraced it.

This passage is complex and elegantly constructed; one of its central contentions is the typically Sallustian point that the emergence of a new elite, embodied by Marius and supported by the consensus of the people, is the only solution that will enable the return of the ancestral virtues that made the Republic great. The *homo novus* is the best continuator of the great figures of the past. Someone like Sulla, the ambitious lieutenant of Marius who appears in the final part of the conflict, is the bearer of a different approach to politics and to military life – all the more ironically, because he will later become the great champion of the nobility, and the arch-enemy of the *popularis* Marius. The relationship between Sulla and his soldiers is unprecedented in the history of the Roman army, and it is a premonition of the personal armies that would shatter and trademark the history of the first century BC (95-96, transl. J. C. Rolfe):

Sulla, then, was a noble of patrician descent, of a family almost reduced to obscurity through the degeneracy of his ancestors. He was well versed alike in Grecian and

Roman letters, of remarkable mental power, devoted to pleasure but more devoted to glory. In his leisure hours he lived extravagantly, yet pleasure never interfered with his duties, except that his conduct as a husband might have been more honourable. He was eloquent, clever, and quick to make friends. He had a mind deep beyond belief in its power of disguising its purposes, and was generous with many things, especially with money. Before his victory in the civil war he was the most fortunate of all men, but his fortune was never greater than his deserts, and many have hesitated to say whether his bravery or his good luck was the greater. As to what he did later, I know not if one should speak of it rather with shame or with sorrow.

Now Sulla, as I have already said, after he came with his cavalry to Africa and the camp of Marius, although he was without previous experience and untrained in war, soon became the best soldier in the whole army. Moreover, he was courteous in his language to the soldiers, granted favours to many at their request and to others of his own accord, unwilling himself to accept favours and paying them more promptly than a debt of money. He himself never asked for payment, but rather strove to have as many men as possible in his debt. He talked in jest or earnest with the humblest, was often with them at their work, on the march, and on guard duty, but in the meantime did not, like those who are actuated by depraved ambition, try to undermine the reputation of the consul or of any good man. His only effort was not to suffer anyone to outdo him in counsel or in action, and as a matter of fact he surpassed almost all. Such being his character and conduct, he was soon greatly beloved by both Marius and the soldiers.

We are in a similar territory to the portrait of Catiline: there is more than a hint of the ‘paradoxical portrait’ in this masterful representation of Sulla. Like his friend and associate Catiline, Sulla was capable of the most appalling things: he was responsible for the Civil Wars and the proscriptions, of course, and as a young man he had decisively contributed to the defeat of Jugurtha by persuading Bocchus, an ally of the King, to be the bait in the Roman ambush that led to the capture of the king.

Sulla, his regime, and his policies are crucial for Sallust and his historical work, and not simply because they shaped the world in which he lived and operated so deeply. For an associate of Caesar like Sallust, Sulla was everything that had to be avoided and loathed, for good and for ill: he was the champion of the Senate, but he also was a dictator who had resigned his office, hence leaving the job unfinished. Sulla wrote his autobiography, and the history of his victory and rule was memorably told by the historian Sisenna – himself a prominent politician – whom Sallust read and admired, despite their different political positions. The great work of Sallust, the *Historiae*, implicitly paid tribute to Sisenna and the importance of his subject matter in the most explicit fashion: its starting point was 78 BC, the year of Sulla’s death,

which was the endpoint of Sisenna's narrative. The choice belongs in the established ancient tradition of the 'historical cycle': framing one's historical work in continuity with another work was a typical strategy that historians had at their disposal to assert their authority and credentials. For an author like Sallust, with his political agenda, exploring the years that followed the Sullan regime, in which a significant part of Sulla's reform were undone or watered down, must have carried further significance. Unfortunately, we do not know much about the structure and the contents of the *Historiae*, which survive only in fragments.

We know that it was a general history, with a different outlook to that of the monographs. It consisted of five books, and it covered the events until 66 BC; we can safely guess that the discussion was fairly detailed, probably to a scale comparable to that of Livy's history. It seems that the focus of this work was annalistic, and that the approach to history was remarkably different from that of the monographs. Any statement on the *Historiae*, however, is bound to be tentative or provisional, because so much of this work has gone lost. The only sizeable portions we have come from a ninth century manuscript, now in the Vatican Library, which contains a series of speeches and letters from Sallust's works, including the *Historiae*. We do not even know whether the selection is complete or not. The other fragments from the *Historiae* are considerably smaller, and they usually derive from isolated quotations by later authors.

The fortuitous fact that most of what we know of the *Historiae* is a speech does not necessarily mean that speeches played as prominent a part in this work as they did in the previous ones. One of the speeches from the *Historiae* is an address to the people by the consul of 78 BC, M. Aemilius Lepidus, who set out to dismantle Sulla's legacy shortly after the death of the former dictator, and failed in his purpose. This speech is probably the most significant testimony of the arguments made by Sulla's opponents; we can expect Sallust to have been sympathetic to it, but we cannot tell what role it played in the bigger scheme of the narrative. We are equally in the dark about the role of another memorable extract of the *Historiae*, a long letter that Mithridates, King of Pontus and arch-enemy of the Romans, wrote to the king of Parthia suggesting an alliance against the Romans. This piece is a formidable attack

on Roman rule and on the greed of the Roman elite. We cannot assume, or indeed expect that Sallust agreed with all the points that were made in the letter, but it is already significant that he chose to voice such a radical critique of the making of the Roman empire. Let us see Mithridates' alternative, and entirely negative account of the Roman conquest of the Greek world:

In fact, the Romans have one inveterate motive for making war upon all nations, peoples and kings; namely, a deep-seated desire for dominion and for riches. Therefore they first began a war with Philip, king of Macedonia, having pretended to be his friends as long as they were hard pressed by the Carthaginians. When Antiochus came to his aid, they craftily diverted him from his purpose by the surrender of Asia, and then, after Philip's power had been broken, Antiochus was robbed of all the territory this side Taurus, and of ten thousand talents. Next Perses, the son of Philip, after many battles with varying results, was formally taken under their protection before the gods of Samothrace; and then those masters of craft and artists in treachery caused his death from want of sleep, since they had made a compact not to kill him. Eumenes, whose friendship they boastfully parade, they first betrayed to Antiochus as the price of peace; later, having made him the guardian of a captured territory, they transformed him by means of imposts and insults from a king into the most wretched of slaves. Then, having forged an unnatural will, they led his son Aristonicus in triumph like an enemy, because he had tried to recover his father's realm. They took, possession of Asia, and finally, on the death of Nicomedes, they seized upon all Bithynia, although Nysa, whom Nicomedes had called queen, unquestionably had a son.

The myth of Rome as the righteous conqueror that wages just wars could not have received a more forceful blow. We can only speculate on the ways in which this theme could have fitted in the longest work of the author of the *Bellum Jugurthinum*. The theme of Roman greed was repeatedly echoed in that work, especially by Jugurtha – but the king of Numidia owed his fortune to the greed of the senator whom he bribed to secure the inaction of Rome; Mithridates spoke as an uncompromising enemy, who posed as the liberator of the Greek East from the Roman supremacy.

Sallust's style

The last chapter of Sallust's work is largely obscure to us. It is, in itself, a powerful reminder of how fragmentary our picture of Roman historiography is, and not just for the late Republican period. Although Sallust has been read and studied since the late antiquity, we are positively ignorant about a significant part of his work, and some caution must be used in making general statements about the scope and

nature of his work. We can say something positive, however, about his style and the role it played in the broader project of this author. One of the reasons we can express informed judgements on Sallust's style is that we have plenty of examples of Roman prose from the same period; moreover, we know how Cicero dealt with the events of the Catiline conspiracy. Even when the judgements coincide, the syntactic construction of the sentences could not be more different. While Cicero's style was the most illustrious example of ordered, grand, ordered sentences, often based on symmetries and repeated coordination, Sallust's style favoured shorter sentences, where the conjunctions between lists of nouns and adjectives, or verbs, were strikingly absent. The taste for symmetries was expressed in different forms, usually through the use of chiasm.

Shorter sentences do not entail a poorer or less creative style. On the contrary, Sallust was one of the most inventive writers of Latin literature. His creativity was not limited to syntax, but it was displayed even more impressively by his use of the Latin morphology: Sallust made a wide use of archaisms, which is reflected both in the choice of the vocabulary and in the use of endings and spellings that were not used in mainstream first century BC literary Latin. As it is so often the case, these stylistic choices are not simply aesthetic matters. They mirror more general choices, which we have already surveyed above. The emphasis on the decline of the Republic and the decay of the collective ethos of the Roman world finds a match in a style that is both dry and broken. The constant evocation of the model of the early Republic and its virtues justifies the archaisms, which confer a tone of austerity and sternness to the authorial voice and to the narrative as a whole.

This congenial encounter between a sense of the historical tragedy and the use of archaism was one of the most powerful aspects of Sallust's legacy to the development of Roman historiography. Tacitus understood it very well.

Suggested reading:

1. R. Sklenar, 'La République des Signes: Caesar, Cato, and the Language of Sallustian Morality', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* vol. 128 (1998), 205-220 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/284413>]
2. D. S. Levene, 'Sallust's "Catiline" and Cato the Censor', *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, vol. 50, No. 1 (2000), pp. 170-191 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1558942>]
3. T. Wiedemann, 'Sallust's "Jugurtha": Concord, Discord, and the Digressions', *Greece & Rome* vol. 40, No. 1 (Apr., 1993), 48-57 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/643217>]
4. D. S. Levene, 'Sallust's Jugurtha: An "Historical Fragment"', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 82, (1992), 53-70 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/301284>]
5. D. C. Earl, *The Political Thought of Sallust*, Cambridge 1961.
6. R. Syme, *Sallust*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1964.

Short assignment: Provide a summary of the debate between Caesar and Cato in *Cat.* 51-54 and discuss the role that this passage plays in Sallust's agenda.