

87 BCE: An Extraordinary Year at the End of the Roman Republic

In *Roman Republics* Harriet Flower describes periodization as “the most basic tool of the historian and... the first premise from which any further analysis of events will proceed” (2010: 3). On the 2100th anniversary of 87 BCE, the papers of this panel make the case for the importance of that year as a critical moment in Republican history. Though Cinna’s domination was short-lived and its details hazy (Flower 2010: 92-3), the decisions made at its outset had far-reaching repercussions that help shaped the final decades of the Republic politically and economically. “The Revenge Aesthetic of C. Marius” investigates the murders committed by the new regime and how they fit into the broader story of late Republican violence. “Banking on Cinna” examines the economic context of the 80s, calling attention to the monetary reform and debt relief undertaken by Cinna’s faction. “The Last Crossing” considers the importance of 87 in the history of the relationship between Italy and Sicily, as well as the crucial question of how the Romans defined and attempted to limit the power of provincial governors. Finally, “Suicide in the Cathedral” turns to the tragic story of the *Flamen Dialis* L. Cornelius Merula, using it to examine the role of religion in Roman politics and the career of Iulius Caesar. Together, these four papers form a synthesis of the issues and events of 87 BCE by examining the economic, legal, political, and religious challenges and reforms that transformed the power dynamics of the late Republic.

Works cited:

Flower, H. I. (2010). *Roman Republics*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

The Revenge Aesthetic of C. Marius, 87 BCE

In a short but exceedingly violent civil war waged amongst the Romans in the year 87 BCE, victory was attained by outlawed consul L. Cornelius Cinna, who bested his erstwhile colleague Cn. Octavius (from whose leadership the conflict is often known as the *Bellum Octavianum*). Cinna's success was in no small part brought to him by the military *élan* the likewise-outlawed C. Marius, who allied himself with Cinna, and by means of it the two men were restored to their citizenship, allowed to resume the capital, and presented with an opportunity to bring stability to the Commonwealth, which had fallen into chaos following Sulla's March on Rome during the previous year. Pursuant to this latter, Cinna and Marius are presented by Diodorus as having held a meeting with their most eminent supporters to decide the best way to set the state aright. "In order to establish peace on a lasting basis" (ὅπως βεβαίως καταστήσωσι τὴν εἰρήνην; 38.4), they came to the conclusion that it would be necessary to eliminate the chief men amongst their enemies. Several sources describe how Marius and Cinna thereupon accomplished their executions by enfolding them into a general massacre visited upon the city. These authors would have it that the two men treated Rome to the sort of slaughter and murder which an invading army would have visited upon it (*Per.* 80), just as if Rome had been a town belonging to the Carthaginians or the Cimbri (Florus 2.9.13). Lurid details abound: women and children were violated and then murdered (Plutarch, *Mar.* 44), bodies were left in the streets unburied (Plutarch, *op. cit.* 45; Appian 1.9.72; also *Mithridatic Wars* 60), and an overall orgy of

homicide gripped Rome for five full days (Dio, frg. 102). One modern scholar even suggested that Marius was “guilty of proscriptions far worse than Sulla’s”¹.

Grim stuff, this, but it is probably something of an exaggeration. First of all, several of these sources derive from the missing books of Livy. It is widely agreed that Livy, in turn, derived his information from the lost text of L. Cornelius Sisenna, a known confederate of L. Cornelius Sulla and probably by extension an *inimicus* of Marius. It is to be doubted whether his assessment of the year 87 would be entirely without distortion in favor of the future dictator. Plutarch, for his part, drew directly from Sulla’s own *Memoir* of Sulla, whose honesty when it came to Marius is even more dubious. By contrast, a contemporary of the events, Cicero, does not mention widespread butchery, but notes that the slayings, which were still plenty deplorable, were aimed only at the heights of the nobility. Indeed, it is doubtful whether Cinna could have retained control of the city if he had allowed widespread carnage, and even more doubtful that he would have wanted such a liquidation at all. More probably, what happened is more along the lines of what Diodorus, who may also have lived through these years as a very young man, relates: Cinna and Marius had determined to dispose of the *principes* amongst their enemies, but not many more.

Even so, executions there certainly were, and at least Marius (if not Cinna) not only acquiesced to them, but actually seems to have taken a delight in their conduct. It may very well be to his efforts that certain extra touches were added: Cinna may have decreed that Gn. Octavius be killed, for example, but it may very well have been Marius who determined what to do with the body. Furthermore, what became of Marcus Antonius is the stuff of Jacobean tragedy. Those in whose death Marius played a role were not only dispatched, but were done so with a

¹ This bold assertion is made by A. Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*, Oxford 1970, p. 338, as cited Richard Evans, *Gaius Marius: A Political Biography* (University of South Africa Press: Pretoria, 1994), p. 12.

measure of cruelty, enthusiasm, and – if such a word may be forgiven here – a degree of humor, one suggesting that Marius was not merely doing what was necessary, but was capitally enjoying himself.

This presentation will take a look at the very few known victims amongst the hecatombs allegedly murdered by Marius and Cinna. In particular, it will examine the reasons why the men were killed, the circumstances of the deaths themselves, the messages which can be seen as having been sent by them, and the ferocious sort of wit inherent in such messages. It will conclude with some of the long-range repercussions of these slayings, of which echoes could be heard as late as the time of Octavian.

Works cited:

Richard Evans, *Gaius Marius: A Political Biography* (University of South Africa Press: Pretoria, 1994).

Banking on Cinna: The Roman Economy during the *Cinnanum Tempus*

Amid the warfare and political violence of the 80s, it is easy to forget that Rome also suffered from a grave *economic* crisis at this time. The Social War disrupted agriculture and trade in Italy, leading to a debt crisis in 89 BCE. Moneylenders attacked and killed the praetor A. Sempronius Asellio that year because he was sympathetic to the interests of the debtors (App. *BC* 1.54). Mithridates' invasion of the province of Asia in 88 led to a credit crisis at Rome, the joint disasters destroying the fortunes of many (Cic. *Leg Man.* 19). The *lex Cornelia Pompeia* of that year, attempting to cap interest rates at perhaps 12% (Festus 516 L; Klingmüller 1909: 2195; Andreau 1999: 91-2), is no doubt a symptom of this crisis and probably did nothing to ameliorate financial conditions. The same period saw the money supply flooded with new denominations (the *sestertius*), rival monetary systems (the coins of the *socii*), and counterfeits; confidence in Roman currency undoubtedly dropped. This paper will review economic conditions before and during the Social War and argue that the economic crisis of the early 80s seriously exacerbated the political crisis of 88 as loss of fortunes and ruinous debt prompted many Romans to conclude that only a civil war could save them from the shame of bankruptcy or restore their wealth and status. In light of this, 87 marks a crucial turning point. Along with securing military and political control of Rome, it was essential for Cinna and his associates to stabilize the economy. Since they could hardly offer their supporters eastern plunder and even gave up some spoils and prisoners of war to secure Samnite military assistance (Seager 1994: 176), the Marian faction's best hope was debt relief and a stable currency. The *lex Valeria de aere alieno* of 86 accomplished the former, while the praetor M. Marius Gratidianus took care of the latter in 85 (Cic. *Off.* 3.80; Plin. *HN* 33.46.132). While these measures could not ultimately save the Marian

faction from defeat at the hands of Sulla and his friends, they certainly allowed them to put up more effective resistance.

Works cited:

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Klingmüller, F. 1909. "Fenus," *RE* VI: 2187-2205.

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The Last Crossing: Sicily to Italy, 87 B.C.

In this 2100th anniversary year of 87 B.C., it is only right and proper that we turn the bulk of our attention to Cinna and Marius and that which was transpiring within Rome itself; however, the date is also remarkable and worthy of commemoration owing to another event which took place further to the south. In 87 B.C., Diodorus relates that C. Norbanus, the governor of Sicily, crossed out of his province and over to the Italian mainland so as to rescue the inhabitants of the city of Rhegium, then occupied by rebel forces (Diod. 37.2.13-14). So far as can be gleaned from the ancient sources, this was the last time that a governor of Sicily acted in such a way, though the Marian M. Perperna Veiento threatened to do so a few years later in order to rescue the younger Marius who was at that point holed up in Praeneste.

Magistrates assigned to Sicily seemingly had long been accustomed to exercising their *imperium* across the straits as and when necessary, either on the instruction of the Senate or as a result of their own initiative. The earliest example is found in Livy at 23.41.10-12, where he reports that Ap. Claudius Pulcher, the future consul of 212, while serving as the praetor assigned to Sicily in 215, led an army across to Locri in order to try to halt Bomilcar who had brought soldiers, supplies, and elephants from Carthage. Both Wiseman (1987: 114, 123-5) and Brennan (2000: I.152) have previously explored the potential that Sicilian commanders' duties could be reasonably expected to extend into southwest Italy at least down to the period of the First Servile War and possibly beyond. We may be tempted to believe that the *lex Porcia* of c. 101, with its provision that governors not leave their provinces without the express permission of the Senate, may have halted the practice; however, the example of Norbanus itself lends heightened credence to the illusory nature of the *lex Porcia* as described by Lintott (1993: 23, 25-6 *et al.*).

The Sullan *lex Cornelia de maiestate* and the subsequent Caesarian *lex Iulia de repetundis* had some of the teeth which the *lex Porcia* lacked and later governors of Sicily, most

particularly Verres, were constrained from getting involved in the affairs of the Italian mainland, *rei publicae causa* or not. This paper, though, seeks not to explore them but, rather, to consider why in particular Norbanus' exercise of his gubernatorial power in Italy in 87 was the last of a line stretching back to the late 3rd century and why this matters in the wider game of Roman provincial government. It will attempt to show how the comparatively recent Second Servile War in Sicily led to the creation of an idea of Sicily as a complete unit ('*tota Sicilia*' to borrow Cicero's later phrase) rather than as a collection of individual cities with distinct relationships with Rome; it will couple this with the more recent appearance of *Italia* during the Marsic War. Having examined these, the paper will offer a more full explanation as to why it was only after Norbanus' time that a more fixed and delineated boundary between Sicily and Italy became a reality.

Works cited:

Brennan, T.C. (2000), *The Praetorship in the Roman Republic*, 2 vols., (London).

Lintott, A. (1993), *Imperium Romanum, Politics and Administration*, (London).

Wiseman, T.P. (1987), *Roman Studies, Literary and Historical*, (Liverpool).

Suicide in the Cathedral in 87 BC
(really, the Temple of Jupiter ... sorry T. S. Eliot)

Fresh off his landslide 1936 victory over Republican Alf Landon, Pres. Roosevelt tried to pack the Supreme Court with judges favorable to his New Deal legislation, a scheme which alienated many of his supporters and cost him considerable political capital. An ancient Roman parallel occurred in 87 BC when the faction of Marius, fresh after defeating the party of Sulla, purged the opposition and packed the Senate and religious colleges with friends. Marius and Cinna then enacted their own “new deal,” elevating their friends, while the surviving members of the party of Sulla fled for dear life. Marius died very soon after, but his party, led by Cinna, held power for half of a decade, until the counter-revolution of Sulla, upon which they were purged and replaced in an even bloodier reversal of fortune.

Many members of the party of Sulla were caught and killed in the purge of 87. More spectacularly, the *Flamen Dialis* (priest of Jupiter), L. Cornelius Merula, unable to escape, removed his sacral trappings inside the Temple of Jupiter, uttered a death curse against the party of Marius, and cut his veins, desecrating the temple with his blood. His dramatic death well illustrates the intensity of this era of civil war, which Merula did nothing to bring on, especially compared to those most responsible: Marius and Sulla.

The story survives directly or indirectly in Cicero (*Cic. in Cat.* 3.10.24), Livy (*Per.* 79-80), Appian (*BC* 1.64-65), Plutarch (*Mar.* 41), and St. Augustine (*De Civ. Dei.* 3.27), among others, but unfortunately not in the pages of Sallust. For his scientific method, Sallust rightly receives acclaim next to Thucydides (*Vell. Pat.* 2.36.2). His predecessors were less inclined to examine events with a Thucydidean eye for cause and effect, but rather often explained great historical events as the machinations of divine pleasure and anger (nearly a Herodotean approach). They no doubt explained the era of civil war that followed the death of Merula as

Jupiter punishing the Romans for allowing such a stain to contaminate the state. The old-school remedy for such a contamination called for ritual sacrifices to appease the gods, along with penalizing those guilty for the desecration. Much as Dido called for a Hannibal, the *optimatis* historian would claim that Cornelius Merula called for Sulla to punish the guilty party.

Apparently unafraid, Marius and Cinna moved quickly to select a new *Flamen Dialis* and to fill the other vacancies in the religious colleges (and the Senate). They did so with such haste, heedless of the consequences, that they brought into question the legality of the sacral posts they allocated. Their three motives for filling the vacancies require detailed analysis.

Most obviously they were awarding followers and winning over new friends. Priesthoods were political plums in ancient Rome, which gave the incumbents visibility, the factor of great benefit during election campaigns and the voting of bills into law. This was a Roman precursor to the spoils system of Andrew Jackson.

A second motive was to create a semblance of legitimacy whereby all of the organs of government endorsed the new deal. This meticulousness should not be overlooked: when Marius reached the gates of Rome, he ordered the *comitia tributa* to assemble to vote to lift his exile (Plut. *Mar.* 43). However, growing impatient with how long it took, he interrupted after only four tribes had voted, and entered the city then and there. This dedication to *fas*, undermined by an inability to see events through, characterizes several of Marius' actions.

Finally, returning to FDR, a third motive to pack the top two religious colleges with friends was to ensure a favorable outcome in the court of sacral opinion. The colleges of the *pontifices* and *augures* could exert considerable influence on military and legislative procedure. Just as an *augur* had to supervise a sacrifice and observe a propitious sign from the entrails before an army could fight, the priests exerted if anything, even greater veto-power in civilian

matters. On occasion, *augures* have halted elections, allegedly when their enemies gained the advantage (e.g., Liv. 23.31.14). Therefore, in order to enact their own legislative program, the party of Marius and Cinna needed to neutralize the threat of a hostile priesthood.

The *optimatis* historian would add one final, fatalistic conclusion. The most famous beneficiary of the allocation of priesthoods at the hands of Marius and Cinna was none other than the youthful nephew of Marius and future son-in-law of Cinna: Gaius Julius. The purge of 87, which brought him his first taste of power, served as a mere prelude to the calamitous ruin he inflicted upon the party of Sulla from 49-45, in which many the ancient aristocratic houses perished.