

## Quantifying the philanthropy of a Roman general: numismatic evidence and Lucullus' financial "help" to the Ephesians

While the scholarly debate during the cold war brought about new theoretical approaches to Roman provincialization, locals are still studied, for the most part, in relation to the political center and even epigraphic sources scarcely allow looking at provincials below the level of elites. In this paper I argue for an inversion of perspective: only by means of a quantitative analysis of local economic issues can one retrieve the voice of the unheard and better approximate the full picture of late Republican politics.

My paper will look at the economic agenda pursued by Lucullus in the province of Asia between 71 and 67 BCE from the standpoint of Ephesus. I will examine the financial situation of the city before 71 and then try to appraise Lucullus' measures considering the conditions of the city after his intervention. In my talk, I will use numismatic evidence as the most objective – and, in a sense, most “local” – marker of financial health to argue that historiography tends to portray the innovations of the general in a favorable light.

Lucullus' financial aid to the indebted cities of Asia are mainly known to us thanks to Plutarch (*Luc.* 20). According to his account, Lucullus' intervention consisted in three steps: interest rates were brought down to 1% per month; all the interests on interests had to be treated as cancelled; the lender could not receive more than a fourth of the debtor's income. Aside from the obvious fact that no tax-farmer could be happy about Lucullus' policies, the scope and the logic of his measures have been debated at length. It is no mystery that the *Life of Lucullus* is pervaded by a highly positive tone towards the general. The crisis of the province and the reforms themselves are accordingly emphasized and framed as a further reason to praise Lucullus' philanthropy, and according to the *Life* his measures applied to all cities of Asia (*Luc.*

20.3). A substantial branch of scholarship affirmed, conversely, that in 71/70 Lucullus aimed to restore the solvency of the local communities and thus gather as much liquidity as he could in order to fund the next steps of his campaign.

To investigate the logic behind Lucullus' design, a good question to ask is whether, after his success at Cabira and Mithridates' flight to Armenia, the general imagined the war to be close to an end (Fratantuono 2004). I show that a more satisfactory answer, however, can come from local silver (cistophoric) coinage. At this stage of time, there were five to six mints active in the province. While all cistophori bore a mintmark on their reverse, only the ones from Ephesus had a dating system, which was expressed in numerals and started from the beginning of provincial era in 133 BCE.

Strikingly enough, there are no surviving specimens from Ephesus in the years following Lucullus' tenure (67-58 BCE), while not all mints seem to be affected by the phenomenon to the same extent (Backendorf 1999; Carbone 2019). Numismatists commonly refer to this stoppage as the "cistophoric break" and connect it to a general financial exhaustion of the province after decades of war.

Moreover, quantitative analysis (Backendorf 1999 – for quantification, I adopt the approach of Callatay 2011 and the geometric formula of Esty 2011) shows that the Ephesian mint records an impressively high number of obverse dies for the years in which Lucullus' measures were enacted (71-67 BCE), as if the city had been ordered to make an extraordinary payment and therefore had to mint a much larger amount of bullion than it would regularly stamp.

By means of numismatic evidence, I argue that the cistophoric break in Ephesus (67-58 BCE) was caused precisely by a lack of silver subsequent to the extraordinary enterprise that

Lucullus requested from the city. Moreover, the fact that not all mints seem to be affected by the break can suggest that Plutarch might have exaggerated the scope of Lucullus' plan, and that his measures were not concerned with other cities to the same extent as the Ephesian community.

#### Works Cited

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