THE DEATH OF MARIUS

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A dark, gloomy cloud of madness, illness and delirium hangs over the last days of Marius, according to the ancient tradition\(^1\). These are black days during which the dying man moves in a confused and disturbed fashion amid the looming, sombre appearances of unquiet, distress, despair and failure.

The story opens in 88 B.C. Marius, whose generalship had brought Rome to victory in the African Wars of 112—105 and who had rescued the whole of Italy from the invading Germanic hordes in 104—101, when the state's other generals had failed miserably, was the most honoured politician of his time, having attained the unprecedented distinction of six consulships. Rome was in this year faced by a major Asiatic war and stood in obvious need of Marius' experience and strategy. The supreme command in this war was also sought by P. Cornelius Sulla, a rising politician who had made his name partly by slandering Marius, at one time his commanding officer. In spite of Marius' greater age — he was 68 — his standing and political dexterity secured him the command. Sulla then led his army on Rome to claim the command for himself.

After being outlawed by the military coup of 88, Marius had undergone the privations and indignities of a flight into exile. By superhuman resolution and unflagging efforts combined with his strategist's opportunism he succeeded in a counter-coup, when Sulla had left for Asia, which restored him, by the end of 87, to his former high position in society and which outlawed Sulla. With revenge taken the iron will which alone had sustained him abated its unyielding, compulsive drive and Marius' elderly body at length succumbed to the hardships he had recently undergone.

This is the grim background against which the last dramatic scene is set. The hardships of exile had done more than sap Marius' bodily vigour and vitality. They had undermined his balance of mind also. The iron will\(^3\) that had brought Marius to greatness in his youth and enabled him to stand out successfully against the sentence of outlawry had taken on a new and sinister form in this last great effort. Always a man of bitter resentments\(^4\), by brooding on the injustice of the sentence of outlawry and the cruel ingratitude of his former protégé, Marius had become the victim of an idée fixe: revenge. He returned an unkempt figure with staring eyes and an obsession for vengeance which showed in every statement that he made. But his resources of mental vigour had been spent and his mind balked at the prospect of the planning necessary to combat Sulla, now coming victorious with his army from Asia. Moreover, Sulla's victory that had sent him into outlawry had broken Marius'\(^5\)

\(^1\) The death of Marius is described in Plutarch, *Marius* 45, 2—7, which is closely followed here.

\(^2\) Sulla served as Quaestor and Proquaestor under Marius in Africa and was a member of his staff in the Cimbric War until 103: Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic* (1952), vol. 2, p. 557. For his slandering Marius cf. Plutarch, *Marius* 10, 5—6; 26, 5 and 32, 2.

\(^3\) For instances of it see Plutarch, ibid. 4, 2 and 6, 3.

\(^4\) Ibid. 10, 6; 31, 1; 32, 2.

\(^5\) Ibid. 41, 4; cf. also 36, 6.
confidence in his ability to defeat Sulla in a subsequent engagement. Horrifying memories of the dangers passed through in outlawry, continually recurring to his mind, combined with this intellectual exhaustion and breakage of morale to bring on a deep depression with repeated nightmares. The iron will was shattered, the resilient intellect drained of its vitality: escapism was the only course to hand. In his efforts to secure untroubled sleep and brief forgetfulness of his dilemma Marius took to heavy drinking. This abuse proved too much for his aged body and sorely tried reserves of physical vitality. Pleurisy struck him down. With some last despairing words to his friends he took to his bed. Delirium seized and racked him. From his ravings it could be clearly seen that his deranged mind imagined he was conducting the campaigns in Asia. Within the short space of a week he was dead.

It is a vivid picture this, and psychologically coherent. It is tense, stark narrative that sweeps to a climax with all the inevitability of Classical drama. Classical drama, however, is far removed from history — as is this account of Marius' death upon closer analysis. The chain reaction unpleasant memories—depression—drink—pleurisy—delirium—death was set in motion by the imminent return of Sulla and his victorious army from Asia. Now Marius died on January 13, 86 B.C. At this time Sulla was in Greece, still besieging Athens and the Asiatic forces there, vastly superior in numbers, were quite undefeated. Sulla had only five legions; so, with no supplies from Italy and menaced by an Asiatic army coming as reinforcements through Northern Greece, he was in a particularly parlous position. Sulla did not in fact return to Italy until 83.

The psychology of Plutarch's reconstruction is wrong as well as the chronology; far from defeating Marius by superior military ability in 88, Sulla had merely driven him a civilian, from Rome by using an army; at this point he was desperately worried about an attack by Marius, who was in fact preparing a force to go to Greece and take over. The whole psychological reconstruction being based upon this anachronism is quite worthless.

It is anyway flawed by an internal contradiction. It is represented that Marius through sheer terror of defending himself against a victorious Sulla coming from Asia gradually relapses through various stages of a breakdown into delirium in which he sees himself commanding the war in Asia. The thought which dominates his consciousness and precipitates the breakdown is that the war in Asia has been won by Sulla who is returning to attack him. In his delirium the thought uppermost in Marius' thoughts is the conduct of the Asiatic war — i.e. it is assumed that the war is still going on and that the take-over from Sulla will occasion no difficulties; the background to such

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7 Last in the Cambridge Ancient History, vol. 9 (1951), pp. 246—47.
9 Last, ibid., 248—49.
11 Passerini, op. cit. pp. 569—70 and n. 3 on p. 370.
12 Plutarch, Sulla 12, 3.
13 Bennett, Cimna and his times (Diss. Chicago 1923), p. 39.
14 Plutarch, Marius 45, 2.
15 Ibid. 45, 6.
assumptions is high, not broken, morale\textsuperscript{16}. Such assumptions are moreover precisely those which the real situation would have encouraged.

This leads to a further objection to the reconstruction. The account of the depression with nightmares is quite inconsistent with that of the delirium. Closer inspection reveals that these are not both parts of one organic whole. The delirium is a piece of information from another unspecified source added to the previous details of the account\textsuperscript{17}. Still closer inspection reveals that the reconstruction is a pastiche of different explanations of the cause of death. Posidonius seems to imply that Marius died of pleurisy and Piso that he took to his bed after a last despairing conversation (but with no mention of illness) and stayed there till his death a week later\textsuperscript{18}. Both accounts aspire to be wholly adequate — and therefore exclusive — explanations of the cause of death. In fact there is much inconsistency between the component parts of the overall account.

These difficulties have caused considerable differences of opinion among scholars as to the true cause of death. Last sidesteps the whole problem, writing of the death, in a detailed account of the period, only: 'On January 13, 86 B.C., Marius died'\textsuperscript{19}. But this is in a general work. Writers of specialist monographs upon the period differ. Bennett says that the explanation of the death as caused by pleurisy is 'likely enough' and rejects the rest of Plutarch's account\textsuperscript{20}, and Passerini that the horrible death described is visited on him by way of punishment by literary enemies, as often, and that Marius possibly, as Piso contends, had a premonition of approaching death (Piso's story is accepted because it is not openly partisan)\textsuperscript{21}. A solution of the problem will not, however, be reached by subjective decisions such as these. It must be resolved as objectively as it has been defined.

This is far from being the only controversial death scene in which a Republican politician stars. The source of detailed information on such death scenes is, for the most part, Plutarch. A collation of these tableaux reveals his technique. It is one of resolving the different traditions centring upon a man's death\textsuperscript{22}. His method of resolving differences in this case has been that of regarding the various accounts as so many stages in the development of one efficient cause. The various accounts have accordingly been presented in a sequence which leads to such an assumption. In this way Plutarch reconciles the differing stories about Marius' death to his satisfaction, if not to ours.

This explanation of these inconsistencies indicates their solution. Plutarch's method is correct in general outline, wrong only in this particular, that, as the cause of death was clearly illness, the stages of breakdown should have been sought by physiological rather than psychological analysis. The stages of Marius'

\textsuperscript{16} As Passerini points out (p. 366). Bennett further points out that such anxiety is completely out of character in Marius, citing Velleius 2, 23, 1 (p. 39).

\textsuperscript{17} It is introduced with the words 'and some say': Plutarch, Marius 45, 6.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 45, 4 and 45, 5 respectively.


\textsuperscript{22} Barbu, Les procédés de la peinture des caractères et la vérité historique dans les biographies de Plutarque, (1934), chap. 6, part 1.
breakdown exhibit a diagnosable symptomatology. When suffering from pneumonia, the patient generally takes to his bed initially because of a generalised feeling of malaise. His condition worsens, pains in the side of the chest developing. Delirium supervenes and death follows within a week. Two points should be noted. Firstly, the modern conception of pleurisy dates from the invention of the stethoscope; the ancients called all diseases involving pains in the chest ‘pleurisy’. The word is now only used where no worse condition is present, the greater term in other cases being preferred to the less significant. Secondly, before the invention of antibiotics, pneumonia was the greatest man-killer of men of Marius’ age-group. Incidentally, the catarrh which he had been unable to shake off in 89 shows that he was constitutionally susceptible to this illness. The cause of death was very probably pneumonia and the differing accounts are, as Plutarch realised, stages in the physical breakdown accompanying the illness as seen through the eyes of various contemporaries.

Examination of this particular incident has suggested a method for dealing with other such controversial points. This method comprises a system for the explanation of internal inconsistencies and an analytical process for resolving them. This process is of more general application however. Medical analysis provides the key to another controversial issue in Marius’ career. In 90 B.C., when the Social War broke out, Marius was given a position of command immediately subordinate to one of the consuls of the year. Amid the repeated defeats of his fellow commanders, his unique record of victories soon brought him the senior command in his theatre of operations. Yet in 89, with the war far from won, Marius was given no military command. In explaining this surprising sequel the ancient source which tells of it gives as reason Marius’ voluntary retirement on grounds of poor physical condition. Marius had however some very influential political enemies who wielded great power in contemporary intrigues and who must have been trying to oust him from any position of power. Consequently there is some controversy over the genuineness of this explanation. Bloc-Carcopino hold that the Senate was now strong enough to dispense with Marius’ services and conciliatory policy and so simply allowed his command to lapse. Marius’ plea of diminished vigour is thus the face-saving excuse of an old man by-passed in a political intrigue. Passerini, however, says that Marius was not interested in the issue. The war was being fought on two fronts, so he could not gain sole credit for final victory; his army was refractory and his strategy depended on good discipline; there may have been rumours of other such

23 Dr. Patterson, a physician of Wellington, New Zealand, gave me invaluable guidance in the medical analysis of the case.
24 Plutarch, incidentally, thought that heavy drinking brought on pleurisy: De Sanitate Tnenda p. 124.
25 Plutarch, Marius 34, 1.
27 Plutarch, Marius 33, 3.
28 Such as Sulla, leagued with the Metelli and Catulus — all bitter enemies of Marius: for the hatred of the latter cf. respectively Plutarch, Marius 29, 2—7 and Appian, Bellum Civile 1, 74, 1.
the impending Asiatic war and he may have wanted to be in Rome to intrigue for command in it. But as no source specifically states otherwise, Passerini thinks Marius’ plea of diminished vitality a true one. However before either hypothesis can be adopted, decision must be reached on the validity of the excuse.

Now both these estimates of the validity of Marius’ explanation are subjective and the latter seems to be inconsistent with the trend of its originator’s argument. Analysis from a medical viewpoint is once again the necessary prerequisite of any reconstruction, especially as Plutarch records three inconsistent statements by Marius himself about his physical condition at this time, all in relation to his fitness for this command. One is that ‘he undertook the campaign out of a sense of shame when it was beyond his powers because his sinews were in poor condition and his body hard to manage’. Another that ‘he had abandoned the command because of complete bodily incapacity caused through lack of strength’. The third is that ‘he was exhausted by old age and catarrh’. This diversity of excuse suggests that there was no obvious cause for retirement and the inconsistencies involved mean that no one of them may be arbitrarily accepted.

To form an objective picture of Marius at this time one must reconstruct his medical case history before and after this year. This shows that Marius was an amazingly healthy and fit man till his last illness. Until the year 100 he was continually in heavy physical training and had a robust frame and constitution. In 133, aged 24, he conquered a Spanish champion in single combat. In 102, aged 54, he was in better condition than his men who had been intensively trained. In 88, aged 68, he was still ‘agile under arms and a capable horseman’. Until 101, even when not campaigning, he lived austerely and on campaign adopted the same regimen as the ordinary soldier. Recorded illnesses to the year 100 are wounds in battle, an operation (unbound!) for varicose veins in the legs, and an attack of diarrhoea. After his success and enrichment, from the year 100, however, his way of living changed. He took to heavy drinking and had a town house and several country houses, all most luxurious. He put on a great deal of somewhat flabby weight. Such was the Marius of 89. But in spite of his excuse on the grounds of health he was capable of training with the young men in that year without being disgraced and of undergoing the hard-

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31 Respectively: Plutarch, Marius 33, 1; 33, 3; 34, 1. A fourth and quite different appraisal of his physical disabilities in 89 is given ibid. 34, 3.
32 Ibid. 3, 2; 20, 6 (for the training of the men cf. 13, 1; 14, 1; 26, 5) and 34, 3 respectively.
33 Ibid. 6, 2; Sallust, Jugurthine War 63, 3; 85, 29; Pliny, Naturales Historiae 33, 150 for his life when not on campaign; and Plutarch, ibid. 7, 2—3; 20, 6; Sallust, ibid. 85, 33; 85, 47 for his life on campaign.
34 Respectively: Sallust, ibid. 85, 29; Plutarch, ibid. 6, 3 and 30, 2.
35 Pliny, ibid. 33, 150; Valerius Maximus 3, 6, 6.
37 Plutarch, ibid. 34, 3.
ships, exposure and privation of his exile in 88 without adverse effect. Consequently his excuse cannot have been genuine, although his loss of condition may well have presented apparent grounds for it. Moreover, to abandon a major but not supreme command on the grounds of physical debility and then immediately to apply for another supreme command is human and understandable but hardly indicates that the original grounds for retirement were compulsive. Again analysis in medical terms enables an objective criticism to be made and helps the scholar to resolve a controversy.

38 Ibid. 34, 3 and 35, 6—43, 3 respectively. The latter included acute seasickness, prolonged hunger and immersion in sea and icy marsh water.
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