THE SULLA SYNDROME

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ABSTRACT
Various reasons have been advanced to account for Sulla's surprising decision to resign the dictatorship in 80 BC. It is the contention of the authors that illness was the reason. Sulla's medical history is examined. Four distinct disease entities can be discerned in the accounts of ancient authors: disfigurement of his facial complexion, discomfort in his feet, a generalised infestation with vermin, and a final episode of massive haemorrhage following on the rupture of an abscess. Syphilis, arising from Sulla's dissolute way of life, has been suggested, but it is now agreed that this disease first appeared in Europe at the end of the 15th century. It is doubtful that a single etiology can account for the whole syndrome. It is thus suggested that tuberculosis, present since 86 BC, could have been responsible for Sulla's facial lesion, the presence of discharging skin ulcers (which could even have harboured vermin from time to time), and a lung abscess which caused fatal haemorrhage. The transient nature of the numbing pain in his feet suggests a minor and temporary affliction.

Late in the year 82 BC, Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix was appointed 'dictator legibus scribendis et rei publicae constituedae' for an unlimited term. Scarcely two years later, he voluntarily resigned his dictatorship and became a private citizen. This unusual abdication has elicited comments from antiquity to the present day. Various reasons have been advanced, ranging from obtuseness\(^1\) and forced retirement due to alleged monarchical ambitions and pressure exerted by political groupings,\(^2\) to a voluntary abandonment of power by stages\(^3\) and illness.\(^4\) It is our contention that the latter motive could well have been the reason for Sulla's surprising decision.

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1 Suet. Iul. 77: Julius Caesar is alleged to have remarked that 'Sulla did not know his political ABC.' According to L. Morgan, "'Levi quidem de re ...": Julius Caesar as tyrant and pedant', JRS 87 (1997) 37, Caesar meant that if Sulla had been a better scholar, he would have appreciated the impossibility of restoring the Republic (which was how his resignation was interpreted).
2 J. Carcopino, Sylla ou la monarchie manquée (1947), referred to in H.H. Scullard, From the Gracchi to Nero (London 1982) 416 n. 46.
3 E. Badian, 'From the Gracchi to Sulla', Historia 11 (1962) 230: dictator till the end of 81, consul 80, privatus 79.
After his abdication at the end of 80 BC, Sulla – apparently in good health – retired to his country estate, but died suddenly at the age of 60 in 78 BC. However, during the siege of Athens in 86 BC, the defenders tauntingly referred to his abnormal facial complexion as ‘a mulberry spotted with meal’, and subsequent writers like Pliny the Elder, Plutarch, Appian, Pausanias and Valerius Maximus all commented on aspects of Sulla’s ill health. In this paper we analyse the records in the light of modern medical knowledge.

**Sulla’s medical history**

For the greater part of his life Sulla enjoyed carousing, often in the presence of dubious company. Plutarch says that he ‘consorted with actresses, harpists and theatrical people, drinking with them on couches all day long’ and he was particularly fond of Metrobius, ‘the impersonator of women’.

However, during the Social War (91 BC), at the age of 47 years, he was clearly in excellent health, when on campaign a flange suddenly burst from a chasm near the shrine of Laverna. When a soothsayer interpreted this phenomenon as indicating that a brave man of rare courage and surpassing appearance would soon lead the government, Sulla declared himself to be this person, with his golden hair and singular looks. Carney interpreted this as confirming that Sulla did not have a disfiguring facial blemish at this stage. We do know that he had only one testicle – possibly of congenital origin (e.g. unilateral undescended testis), as no other cause is evident from his history. This was not associated with infertility as he had 5 children.

Five years later, during his Athenian war (86 BC), a facial abnormality is mentioned which led to taunts from the Greek defenders. The reference to him resembling a ‘mulberry spotted with meal’ would suggest a prominent

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5 Assuming that Sulla was born in 138 BC, as indicated by Vell. Pater. 2.17; Plut. *Sulla* 6.10; Val. *Max.* 9.3.8.
6 συκάμινον ἔσθ’ ὁ Σύλλας, ἀλφίτῳ πεπασμένον (Plut. *Sulla* 2.1).
9 εἰπεῖν δὴ καὶ τοὺς μάντεις ὡς ἀνήρ ἄγαθός ὁ Σύλλας, ἀπαλλάξῃ τῇ πόλει ταραχάς τὰς παραύσιας, τότεν δὲ αὐτὸν εἶναι φησιν ὁ Σύλλας τῆς μὲν γὰρ ὄψεως ἱδιὸν εἶναι τὸ περὶ τὴν κόμην χρυσοτόν ... (Plut. *Sulla* 6.7).
10 Carney (note 4) 67.
11 Justin. *Digesti* 49.16.4: ‘Qui cum uno testiculo natus est quive amisit, iure militabit, secundum divi Traiani rescriptum: nam et duces Sulla et Cotta memorantur eo habitu fuisse naturae.’
12 Carney (note 4) 78-79.
13 Cf. note 6.
coarse redness of his face, with blotches of white. It was probably a permanent lesion, but could have varied in intensity. We have no further evidence as only Plutarch mentions this rash. Pausanias (1.20.7) says that, because of the merciless slaughter of Greeks after Athens had fallen, Sulla was punished with a disease which had also attacked Pherecydes, the Syrian—described as an infestation with vermin, which will be dealt with below.

Approximately one year later (85/4 BC), Sulla disembarked at Athens on his way back from Asia Minor. Plutarch wrote that ‘a numbing pain accompanied by a feeling of heaviness attacked his feet, which Strabo says is premonitory gout.’ Strabo’s original text is lost. Sulla then crossed the straits to take the waters at the warm springs of Aedepsus in Euboea, and also passed the time pleasantly in the company of ‘theatrical artists’, probably associated with the brotherhood of Dionysus. Apparently the illness cleared quite rapidly, and Sulla returned to re-organizing conquered Athens.

Two years after he had himself appointed as dictator of Rome for an unlimited term (late 82 BC), he quite surprisingly prepared for retirement and abdicated all his powers on 31 December 80 BC, retiring to his private estate at Cumae, where he enjoyed hunting and fishing. Appian states that Sulla was of sound condition, but had retired because ‘weary of war, weary of power, weary of Rome, he apparently finally fell in love with rural life.’ In fact, he did not even intervene when M. Aemilius Lepidus stood for the consulship in 79 and advocated a policy hostile to his constitution, but proceeded to write his memoirs with great devotion.

But time was running out for Sulla. He had a dream, which he interpreted as a sign of impending death, wrote his testament and finished his memoirs a day before he died (Appian, BC 1.105.2). Pliny tells us (HN 7.134-37) that the dream enabled him to make peace with his often cruel and merciless past, while Appian writes (BC 1.105.2) that Sulla was visited by his personal gods who invited him to the hereafter. According to Plutarch (Sulla 37.1-2), Sulla wrote in his memoirs that he was visited by his deceased son and wife,

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14 Plut. Sulla 2.1: ἐξήνθηε γάρ τὸ ἐρύθημα τραχύ καὶ σποράδην καταμεμημένον τῇ λευκότητι.
16 Σύλλα δὲ διαστρίβοντει περὶ τὰς Ἀθηνῶν ἀληθίας νορκώδεις μετὰ βάρους εἰς τοὺς κόδας ἐνέπεσεν, ὁ φησίν ὁ Στράβων ποδόγρας ψελλισμὸν εἶναι (Plut. Sulla 26.3).
17 Keaveney (note 15) 124.
Metella, who wanted him to join them in a life of peace and quiet.

On the day after his dream, after sealing his will, we are told by Appian, Sulla developed a fever, and died the same night.¹⁹ However, other authors tell a different story about his death.

According to Plutarch, Sulla’s retirement was characterized by wild excesses,²⁰ thus aggravating a disease which had been present a long time in sub-clinical form. He was unaware that his bowels were ulcerated and that the disease had corrupted all his flesh and converted it into lice.²¹ Persons were employed unsuccessfully day and night to rid him of these vermin. The discharge was so violent that his clothes, hand-basin and food became infected. He immersed himself in water many times a day and scourcd his body, but it was to no avail – the ‘swarm of vermin defied all purification’. It was said that other famous individuals had died of the same disease, including Acastus, Alcman the poet, Pherecydes the theologian, Callisthenes, Micus the jurist, and Eunus the slave who had led a slave revolt in Sicily.²²

Pliny’s diagnosis is that Sulla died of phthiriasis (pediculosus, lice infestation), and that ‘in the very blood of the patient creatures came to life that will eat up his flesh.’²³ (He then prescribes juice of the taminian grape, or hellebore juice and oil as an effective cure.) Sulla had been terribly cruel, Pliny said (HN 7.134, 137), but his own death was more cruel than the fate

¹⁹ App. BC 1.105: σφαγισσαμένος δ’ αὐτὰς περὶ ἐσπέραν πυρετός ἐμπίπτει καὶ νυκτὸς ἐτελεύτησεν.
²⁰ Plut. Sulla 36.2-3: ὅθεν καὶ τὴν νόσον ἅπ’ αἰτίας ἔλαβε ἀσθήματος ἐρχόμενην ἐξέβρεψε, καὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἠμέλησε περὶ τὰ σπάλλητα γεγονός ἐμπύκος, ὥστε θέλεται καὶ τὴν σάρκα διασφαρίζοντας εἰς φθεῖρας μετέβαλε πάσαν, ὡστε πολλῶν δὲ ἡμέρας ἄμα καὶ νυκτὸς ἀφαιροῦντον μὴ δεῖν μέρος τοῦ ἐπιγνισμένου τὸ ἀποκρινόμενον, ἀλλὰ πάσαν ἐσθήτα καὶ λουτρόν καὶ ἀπόγυμα καὶ σιτίου ἀναπληρωματικοῦ ὕματος ἐκείνου καὶ τῆς φθεῖρας τοσοῦτον ἐξήνθησε. διὸ πολλάκις τῆς ἡμέρας εἰς ὕδωρ ἐνέβαινεν ἐκκλίζον τὸ σῶμα καὶ ἀπορρυπάντωμεν. ἢν δὲ οὐδὲν ὀρέθος ἐκράτησε γὰρ ἡ μεταβολὴ τῷ τάχει, καὶ περιεγένετο παντὸς καθαριότητος τὸ πλήθος.
²¹ Incorrectly translated by B. Perrin, Plutarch’s Lives, Vol. 4. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. 1950) 439 as ‘worms’; cf. LSJ s.v. φθείρ > a louse. Carney (note 4) 65 is of the opinion that it might thus simply imply a chronic skin infection. Keaveney (note 15) 210 refers to scabies (a common condition caused by lice infestation with the mite, sarcoptes scabiei), without, however, giving specific references.
²² The mere fact that so many famous individuals are said to have died such a horrible death, suggests that we should regard the infestation with vermin as a topos, and not interpret it too literally. Our anonymous referee referred to Lactantius’ De mortibus persecutorum, which contains numerous instances of wishful thinking about the gruesome deaths of hated tyrants or atheists.
of his victims. After a dream near the time of his death (mentioned above), his body ate itself away.

Both Plutarch and Valerius Maximus relate that Sulla called a local magistrate, Granius, to appear before him on charges of abuse of public money. Sulla flew into a rage, ordered Granius to be strangled, and then developed a fatal collapse.\(^{24}\) Plutarch says that the strain on his body and voice had been too much, that he ruptured his abscess, lost a large amount of blood and became very weak. After suffering much during the night, he died the next day.\(^ {25}\) Valerius Maximus records that in his anger he vomited blood copiously, collapsed and died soon after.\(^ {26}\)

**Discussion of his illness**

In attempting to unravel Sulla’s disease complex, a number of determinants are relevant. His lifelong habit of periodic debauchery could have predisposed him *inter alia*, to the effects of alcohol abuse, and sexually transmitted illnesses. In his medical history there is evidence of four distinct disease entities: disfigurement of his facial complexion, discomfort in his feet (called early gout by Strabo), a generalised infestation with vermin (called phthiriasis by Pliny), and a final episode of massive haemorrhage following on the rupture of an abscess (according to Plutarch).

Obviously these entities need not necessarily have been of single etiology, but this possibility will nevertheless be seriously considered. In an interesting and extensively researched article, Carney\(^ {27}\) argues that the whole syndrome may be ascribed to syphilis, arising from his dissolute way of life. However, in spite of occasional dissenting voices,\(^ {28}\) it is now generally accepted that syphilis, as we know it, first appeared in Europe during the Renaissance, at the end of the 15th century.\(^ {29}\) Other venereal diseases were, of course, well

\(^ {24}\) This description of the circumstances leading to Sulla’s death gives rise to several questions. How did Sulla as a private person come to be involved with a local magistrate? What authority did he have to give the order for Granius’ execution? This story seems to have been a fabrication with a moral twist – the cruel tyrant causing his own death by flying into a rage over a local scandal.

\(^ {25}\) Plut. *Sulla* 37.3-4: ... τῇ δὲ κραυγῇ καὶ τῷ σπαραγμῷ τὸ ἀπόστημα ῥήξας πλήθος οὖματος ἐξέβαλεν. Ἐκ δὲ τούτου τὴς δυνάμεως ἐπιληπτικῆς διαγαγών τὴν νύκτα μοχθηρὸς ἀπέθανε ...  

\(^ {26}\) Val. Max. 9.3.8: ‘... animi concitacione nimia atque immoderato vocis impetu convulso pectore, spiritum curoe ac minis mixtum evomuit ...’

\(^ {27}\) Carney (note 4) 64-79.


recognised in antiquity. Syphilis will thus not be further considered in this paper.

1. A disfiguring facial lesion (present at least from 86 BC)

The Greeks referred to this as his ‘mulberry spotted with meal’ complexion; Plutarch further describes it by saying that ‘a coarse redness erupted [sc. on the facial skin] with blotches of white.’ It must have been a very prominent disfigurement, consisting of a dark red skin lesion interspersed with white blotches. We agree with Carney that this was unlikely to have been a large congenital naevus (‘Pertwine stain’), in view of the evidence from Plutarch that Sulla had previously been considered of handsome countenance. Possible causes of such an appearance could include psoriasis, rosacea, Leishmaniasis and sarcoidosis. A sufferer from Psoriasis characteristically develops a prominent red skin eruption (erythema) and extensive white scaling of the lesion, but it affects the face only very rarely, and usually when the rest of the body is extensively involved. Rosacea was quite common in middle-aged men, and its prominent affection of the nose (rhinophyma) and cheeks in particular is aggravated by exposure to heat and wind. However, the erythema in this benign condition is not typically blotched with white. Sarcoïdosis presents in many ways, but its Lupus pernio variant is characterised by bluish-red infiltration of the nose, cheeks, eyelids and extremities. Again white blotching of the skin is atypical, and the disease is probably a modern one, first described towards the end of the 19th century. We have reason to believe that Leishmaniasis of the face (‘oriental sore’) might well have occurred in Roman times, presenting as bluish-red infiltrations of the skin — but this is normally a localised lesion, unlikely to cause a ‘mulberry’-like facial complexion. The suggestion that constant scratching

*Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (London 1997) 166-68.

30 Plut. *Sulla* 2.1; cf. note 6.
32 Carney (note 4) 64-67.
33 Cf. note 9. Plutarch (*Sulla* 2.4) also relates that he won the love of a wealthy demi-monde ‘because of his ... youthful grace’ (διὰ ... χάριν, ἥν ἄφι᾽ ἀφασι οἰς ἑγεν).
35 Moschella (note 34) 1139-42.
36 Moschella (note 34) 768-70.
38 F.P. Retief & L. Cilliers, ‘Epidemics of the Roman Empire 27 BC-476 AD’, *South African
of an itching skin, caused by scabies, could have disfigured his face, is most unlikely, as scabies almost never attacks the face.

More likely pathology would include lupus erythematosus, leprosy and cutaneous tuberculosis (lupus vulgaris).

(i) **Lupus erythematosus.** The skin manifestation is characteristically a chronic erythro-squamous (red and scaly) lesion of the ‘butterfly area’ of the face – nose and cheeks. It is aggravated by sunlight. It may progress to affect the rest of the face, and may be part of a potentially fatal systemic disease (systemic lupus erythematosus, SLE) which also affects organs like the kidneys, nervous system, cardiovascular system and ‘eyes."

(ii) **Leprosy** is an ancient disease, but clearly not all references to this disease in antiquity represent what we today know as leprosy. Chinese literature of the 3rd century BC, and Indian documents of around 600 BC describe a disease compatible with modern leprosy, and it probably appeared in the Far East in the 3rd century BC. The first archaeological evidence of leprosy in skeletons in Egypt and western Europe dates back to the 4th century AD. It is thus possible but probably unlikely that Sulla in the 1st century BC would have acquired the disease. Clinically it could affect the face by way of erythro-squamous skin plaques (in tuberculoid, chronic leprosy) or reddish-blue thickening of the skin, nose, eyebrows and lips which proceeds to grotesque distortion (leonization) of features (lepromatous, more acute leprosy).

(iii) **Tuberculosis.** Tuberculosis is a disease of great antiquity. Sallares makes out a good case that human tuberculosis probably originated from bovine tuberculosis when man domesticated cattle in the 7th to 5th millennia BC and started drinking cow's milk. Archaeology has produced evidence of unmistakable skeletal tuberculosis in the Mediterranean basin (but also as far north as Denmark) from the 4th millennium BC onwards. There is also evidence of soft tissue tuberculosis in mummified tissues from Egypt. The first recognizable description of tuberculosis is found in the Hippocratic writings, 5th

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39 Keaveney (note 15) 88.
40 Moschella (note 34) 914-32.
41 Moschella (note 34) 808-25.
century BC, where pulmonary tuberculosis and characteristic destructive lesions of the vertebral column (later called Pott's disease) are clearly described. It was thus probably a common disease in the time of Sulla.

Tuberculosis is a chronic systemic illness which may infect virtually all organs. Tuberculosis of the skin (lupus vulgaris) characteristically affects the face in 80% of cases, by way of reddish-blue plaques which enlarge steadily, with partial healing which leaves areas of white scar tissue in the lesion. Untreated it usually lasts a life-time.

2. Affection of the feet (85/84 BC)

Sulla was temporarily afflicted by 'a numbing pain and heaviness of his feet', which was apparently cured by taking the waters at Aedespes. According to Plutarch (Sulla 26.3), Strabo (in a passage now lost) called it early gout, but Spencer points out that contemporary writers often used the term to denote any arthritic condition — and not necessarily gout as we know it. Acute gout characteristically affects the big toe, but may spread to other parts of the foot. The pain is usually very severe, not rapidly cured, and the condition is exacerbated by heavy eating and drinking. Sulla could also have developed a relatively minor orthopaedic problem of unknown origin, amenable to hydrotherapy — and the associated relaxation in the company of Dionysiac actors. Theoretically the symptoms could have been due to peripheral neuritis (a rare complication of SLE, and a common manifestation of leprosy), but the rapid cure counts strongly against either diagnosis.

3. Infestation with vermin

135-42.

44 F. Adams (transl.), Hippocrates. The Genuine Works of Hippocrates (London 1985), Epidemics 1.1.2; Articulations 41.

45 Moschella (note 34) 792-95.

46 Plut. Sulla 26.3 (cf. note 16), incorrectly translated by Perrin (note 21) 409: '... his feet were attacked by numbness and a feeling of heaviness.'


48 Moschella (note 34) 914-32, 808-25.
Pliny⁴⁹ and Plutarch⁵⁰ both write that Sulla’s body was gradually destroyed by minute creatures which devoured his flesh. Plutarch says it had its origin in his dissolute way of life and resulted in foul discharges from his body which contained lice. This could not have been scabies, as the scabies mite is barely visible and causes itching and eczema, but not large-scale discharges.⁵¹ Neither mite nor lice enter the body or bloodstream to cause systemic disease. Plutarch (Sulla 36.3-4) and Pausanias (1.20.7) recall instances where death due to internal destruction of the body by vermin occurred – and mention names of victims. It is even possible that Pherecydes the Syrian (mentioned by Pausanias), is the same person as Pherecydes the theologian (mentioned by Plutarch). Of historical interest, too, is the account in the Bible (Acts 12:23) that King Herod was devoured by worms.

We would suggest – if we were to take Pliny’s and Plutarch’s accounts of an infestation with vermin literally – that Sulla’s discharges could have been urethral, of venereal origin (e.g. chronic gonorrhœa), but are much more likely to have originated from suppurating abscesses. Although such abscesses could have arisen from chronically infected wounds or injuries, it is more likely to have been due to organisms known to cause chronic suppuration – such as the ubiquitous tuberculosis bacillus. Tuberculosis may cause suppurating skin ulceration in a variety of ways – a common lesion in earlier times being scrofuloderma (arising from underlying tuberculosis of lymph nodes) or ‘King’s evil’, traditionally cured by the Royal touch of a king.⁵² Extensive abscesses such as these may have harboured fly larvae occasionally to account for the presence of visible vermin reported by Plutarch.

Sulla possibly had unilateral undescended testes, which may lead to cancer in the abdominally retained gonad. However, this clinical picture would hardly fit Sulla’s medical history.⁵³

4. The fatal incident

⁵¹ Marshall (note 37) 410.
According to Appian, Sulla retired in 79 BC in good health but weary of the rigors of governing Rome, and rapidly died of a fever less than two years later. However, Plutarch and Valerius Maximus described a more unpleasant death, during an emotional outburst associated with his execution of Granius. According to Plutarch, he ruptured an abscess (situation not stated), bled profusely, collapsed and died within 24 hours. Valerius Maximus wrote that the haemorrhage occurred through his mouth, and caused immediate collapse and speedy death.

We would suggest that the fatal haemorrhage probably came from a tuberculous abscess or cavity in the lung, a common incident in untreated tuberculosis. Plutarch spoke of ulceration of Sulla’s innards. It would be most unusual to develop acute fatal bleeding from an external abscess, e.g. that of scrofuloderma. Another distinct possibility would be massive haemorrhage from oesophageal varices, a typical complication of alcoholic cirrhosis of the liver. Sulla’s dissolute way of life could well have caused alcohol abuse. Bleeding oesophageal varices cause a very high immediate mortality, even in modern times. An emotional outburst, when associated with hyperventilation, is perhaps more likely to precipitate pulmonary haemorrhage than bleeding from varices in the gullet.

Conclusion

It is suggested that tuberculosis, a disease attested before 86 BC, could have been responsible for Sulla’s facial lesion and the presence of discharging skin ulcers. Furthermore, a tuberculous lung abscess or the characteristic tuberculous pulmonary cavity may have caused fatal haemorrhage. This presupposes that, contrary to Appian’s observation, Sulla was indeed a sick man when he retired from public life, two years before his death. It might also explain his unexpected behaviour of leniency towards potential adversaries and his voluntary abdication of power relatively soon after establishing his dictatorship. Tuberculosis would probably not explain the problem he experienced with his feet in Athens, 85/84 BC, but the transient nature if this event suggests an unimportant temporary affliction. It was

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54 App. BC 1.104-05; cf. note 18.
55 Plut. Sulla 37.3-4; cf. note 25.
56 Val. Max. 9.3.8; cf. note 26.
58 Beeson & McDermott (note 57) 1347-51.
probably not a typical attack of gout, as we know it.

Alcoholic liver cirrhosis with haemorrhage from oesophageal varices could certainly account for the final episode leading to death, but would not explain some other features of his illness.

If tuberculosis as a likely diagnosis is ruled out, *lupus erythematosus*, leprosy and even *sarcoidosis* are systemic diseases which could also have caused the facial disfigurement. Leprosy might also have led to extensive suppuration, and foul discharges through the skin (like tuberculosis), but otherwise these diseases could hardly be responsible for the rest of Sulla’s syndrome. However, it is possible that he had more than one illness — and then extensive *rosacea* could well have caused the ‘mulberry facies’.