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2018

### Sallust, Empire, and Excess

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#### Recommended Citation

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Dylan Ingram

“Sallust, Empire, and Excess,” Fall 2017

The program of acquiring and demonstrating *virtus*, the essential qualities of masculinity, through empire-building defeats itself in the Roman historian Sallust's thought as developed in his monograph *Bellum Catilinae*.<sup>1</sup> In Sallust's narrative of Roman history from the monarchy to Sulla's dictatorship (*Bellum Catilinae* 5.9-13.5, known as the Archaeology), the two inflection points in Rome's moral descent are associated with the destruction of Carthage and with Sulla's campaign in Asia, two military actions in which Roman borders were defended or expanded. In his interpretation of history before 146 BCE, Sallust reports that Romans demonstrated *virtus* primarily if not exclusively in a military context. The Romans were deprived of an external force against which to prove their manhood in the absence of a strong enemy and could pursue luxury to an extent that the supposedly effeminate conquered peoples of distant provinces did.

By comparing Sallust's text with works by other ancient authors, some insight might be made concerning Sallust's selection of certain details that contribute to themes which are not explicitly developed in the *Bellum Catilinae* but nonetheless inform the text. The idea that regular warfare against a strong enemy increased one's *virtus* was a common trope in Greek and Roman rhetoric and historiography. One component of Cicero's praise for Pompey is that he entered the army young and during a time of extreme danger (*acerrimis hostibus*).<sup>2</sup> This concept could also be applied to entire nations. In the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, for instance, Caesar writes that the Helvetii possess the most *virtus* among the Gauls because of the regularity of their warfare against the Germani (*Helvetii quoque reliquos Gallos virtute praecedent, quod fere cotidianis proeliis cum Germanis contendunt*).<sup>3</sup> Inversely, luxuries and pleasant conditions are associated with femininity. Caesar again provides a clear example when he mentions the imported wares which have a feminizing quality (*ad effeminandos animos pertinent*) and praises the Belgae for their distance from those luxuries.<sup>4</sup> These and other pleasures tended to be

associated with the East. In an article on Sallust's treatment of Roman moral decline, Barbara Weiden Boyd cites the Hippocratic *Airs, Waters, Places* as an early ethnographic account of Asian luxury. The Hippocratic author explains that Asia is milder than Europe, and then states, "bravery [...] cannot arise in such an environment" (*τὸ δὲ ἀνδρεῖον [...] οὐκ ἂν δύναίτο ἐν τοιαύτῃ φύσει ἐγγίνεσθαι*); that the latter follows from the former is strongly suggested.<sup>5</sup> These two literary commonplaces will help to explain the significance of Sallust's mention of Africa and Asia in his narrative of Roman decline.

Myles McDonnell has noted that *virtus* appears in Sallust's *Archaeology* "with one exception, in the context of foreign affairs," namely war.<sup>6</sup> The ancient Romans of Sallust's narrative defend their borders by means of their *virtus*, allowing them to establish alliances. Sallust calls these alliances *amicitias*, which is essentially a euphemism for imperial domination etymologically linked to the concept of friendship. In this framework, citizens could compete over glory by demonstrating their bravery in military actions, while wars were only waged against foreign enemies.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Sallust frames the establishment and maintenance of empire as the primary arena for the use and affirmation of *virtus*. Moreover, these activities are generally described as morally correct. According to Sallust, the end of the monarchy allowed good men to display their talents in public, and this openness was the driving force for competition among citizens, which is named as an example of the generation's "good customs" (*boni mores*).<sup>8</sup> Even in descriptions of later times, the link between martial expansion and demonstration of one's *virtus* is made clear, for example when Sallust writes that Caesar "longed for great authority, an army, and a new war where his *virtus* could shine" (*sibi magnum imperium, exercitum, bellum novom exoptabat, ubi virtus enitescere posset*).<sup>9</sup>

Given that significant effort was put into proving one's worth as a man in war, the Roman state grew to dominate Italy and other parts of the Mediterranean world by the mid-second century BCE. Sallust argues that everything changed after Rome had expanded its borders, conquered all its enemies, and enjoyed access to the entire world. Among these many defeated peoples and open lands, only Carthage is named explicitly.<sup>10</sup> As D.S. Levene notes, the decision to specify only Carthage is noteworthy in that it represents a break from "majority opinion" by situating the onset of Roman decline earlier than was typical: this disagreement with common knowledge draws attention to the ironic juxtaposition of uncontested Roman imperial power with the threat to Roman morality. Moreover, it heightens Carthage's importance in Sallust's treatment of his theme.<sup>11</sup>

Sallust implies the situation after Carthage's destruction was the source of Rome's subsequent immorality, but *Bellum Catilinae* alone leaves some ambiguity as to the exact mechanism by which Romans began to abandon their morals. He writes that the present "circumstances" (*fortuna*, the exact meaning of which has been debated in the literature) played a role in changing the order of things and that "leisure" and "wealth" (*otium, divitiae*) became deleterious.<sup>12</sup> The reference to *fortuna* recalls the first use of the word in the prologue, where Sallust argues that the assignment of power follows the best people and leaves the worst, changing at the same time as one's moral behavior (*fortuna simul cum moribus inmutatur*).<sup>13</sup> In this instance, *fortuna* refers rather simply to a person's standing with respect to *imperium*; if Sallust is using the word in the same sense at 10.1, then Rome's status as a world power is itself the disruptive *fortuna* of the passage.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Sallust's qualifying comment that leisure and wealth are "desirable under some conditions" (*optanda alias*) indicates that pleasure-seeking itself might not be detrimental—rather, new circumstances have changed the moral resonance of

desire for ease.<sup>15</sup> Under conditions of uncontested power, looking for leisure is made out to be decadence, as Sallust further develops the theme in his account of Sulla's Asian campaign.

The Archaeology of the *Bellum Catilinae* is not the only text in which Sallust refers to the destruction of Carthage. His treatment of Carthage in *Bellum Jugurthinum* further expands upon the reasons for connecting Roman decline with Carthage's destruction:

*Nam ante Carthaginem deletam populus et senatus Romanus placide modesteque inter se rem publicam tractabant, neque gloriae neque dominationis certamen inter civis erat; metus hostilis in bonis artibus civitatem retinebat.*

For before Carthage was destroyed, the Roman people and senate managed the republic peacefully and moderately, and there was no competition between citizens over glory or power; fear of an enemy kept the city within good habits.<sup>16</sup>

Boyd and Levene inform their reading of *BC* 10.1 using this passage, on the grounds that "fear of an adversary" (*metus hostilis*) was such a common expression and concept in antiquity as not to need to be explicitly spelled out in *Bellum Catilinae*. In their analysis, *BI* 41.2 simply puts into words what *BC* 10.1 meant all along: the Romans were forced to behave well when Carthage was a threat, and the lack of a strong enemy explains immorality.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the basic sequence of events is clear: ancient Romans expressed their *virtus* through their military accomplishments, so that their imperial power grew to new height, which initiated moral decline.

Sallust equivocates on whether he believes greed or ambition was the first vice to arise within the context of this moral decline. At different points, he writes both "at first desire for money grew, then desire for power" (*primo pecuniae, deinde imperi cupido crevit*) and "at first ambition drove peoples' minds more than greed" (*primo magis ambitio quam avaritia animos hominum exercebat*).<sup>18</sup> Since Sallust comments on *virtus* in the second account, it will receive

more attention here. For Sallust, “ambition” (*ambitio*) is roughly defined as dishonestly striving after social capital and political office, but it is a lesser evil than desire for money and luxuries (*avaritia*). Under this definition, *ambitio* has similar results to and is therefore “close to” *virtus* (*propius virtutem*), but the fact that it is clearly called morally wrong (*vitium*) indicates a difference between mere striving after power and *virtus* proper.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Sallust never attributes *ambitio* to Romans before 146 BCE; moral and societal tumult begin only after Carthage’s destruction. The decision to destroy Carthage is not labelled with any judgment, although Sallust portrays it as a mistake given its pivotal role in the corruption of the Roman people. On the contrary, the Romans before 146 BCE are broadly praised for their sometimes-excessive bravery (*audacia in bello*). Both foreign wars and civil contests concerning *virtus* were the vehicles. Even practices that Sallust recognizes as improper, such as disobeying commands, are taken as proof of this *audacia*.<sup>20</sup> In these ways, Sallust distinguishes between *virtus* and desire for *imperium*, allowing him to depict military accomplishments that decrease Roman manliness rather than proving it.

To address the possibility of warfare making the victors worse, Sallust turns his attention to greed, again naming one example within the sphere of imperial expansion: Sulla’s conquest in Asia. Sallust characterizes this episode as unique in that Sulla permitted extreme consumption of Asian luxuries, which weakened even his soldiers’ resolve. Sallust puts *avaritia* into contrast with *virtus* implicitly by expressing its effeminizing nature:

*Avaritia pecuniae studium habet, quam nemo sapiens concupivit; ea quasi venenis malis inbuta corpus animumque virilem effeminat. [...] Huc adcedebat quod L. Sulla exercitum quem in Asia ductaverat quo sibi fidum faceret, contra morem maiorem luxuriose*

*nimisque liberaliter habuerat. Loca amoena, voluptaria facile in otio ferocis militum animos molliverant.*

Greed consists of desire for money, which no wise man yearns for; as if it were full of evil poisons, it effeminizes both body and manly mind. [...] In addition to this, there was the fact that Lucius Sulla treated the army that he had led into Asia luxuriously and much too lavishly against the custom of our ancestors, in order to make it loyal to him.

Beautiful sights and places dedicated to pleasure easily softened the soldiers' aggressive spirits during their free time.<sup>21</sup>

The words *effeminare* and *mollire* express the opposite of masculinity: these terms are connected to women and men who permitted themselves to be sexually penetrated (which Roman society generally denounced).<sup>22</sup> A man who succumbs to *avaritia*, then, forfeits his most basic claim to *virtus*, his identity as a man (*vir*).<sup>23</sup> The focus the luxuries of Asia (wine, sex, visual arts) draws upon the ethnographic trope described by Boyd.<sup>24</sup> Whereas the Hippocratic author considers Asians soft on the basis of their physical climate, Sallust suggests that Rome's status in the political system of the Mediterranean world enabled feminization of even the supposedly most manly members of society, soldiers. By situating this scene in Asia, Sallust emphasizes the parallelism.<sup>25</sup> The fact that the soldiers indulged so heavily as to match and even outstrip native habits of consumption, leaving nothing behind (*ei milites [...] nihil relicui victis fecere*), indicates by how much Sulla's men differed from their ancestors. In Sallust's interpretation of the moment in history, Roman national character had been lost and replaced with a foreign ethos which fundamentally lacked *virtus*. The same hedonistic habits returned home with the soldiers, so that *virtus* in general "began to die out" (*hebescere [...] coepit*).<sup>26</sup>



Just as ostensibly manly soldiers have been made feminine at this point in the narrative of the Archaeology, foreign values are also invading from an otherwise conquered nation. Thus, the relationship between *virtus* and warfare are the opposite of what they were in the first passages of the Archaeology, on both the individual and national levels. Metaphors from the context of military conquest highlight the fact that the disappearance of *virtus* ultimately owes to the Roman imperial project. When Sallust writes that various vices “invaded” (*invasere*) Rome, he emphasizes the inversion of the roles of conquered and conqueror in the moral sphere.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, the invading vices include “indulgence and greed” (*luxuria atque avaritia*), both of which terms appear in some form in the account about Asia. The importance of *luxuria* to Sallust’s thought on moral decline has been recognized by R. Sklenář (among others), who notes that *luxuria atque avaritia* appears three times in *Bellum Catilinae* and is synonymous with the extent of Roman immorality.<sup>28</sup> The phrase, by stressing the act of pleasure-seeking, links Roman immorality with the provinces in turn: Romans had come to adopt foreign attitudes towards indulgence. The disappearance of *virtus* is supposedly so thoroughgoing that Sallust later comments some stretches of time had absolutely no men with noteworthy *virtus*.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the roots of this degradation are situated in Rome’s handling of foreign lands within its imperial project. In other words, it begins with and accelerates due to mistakes by soldiers who otherwise are engaged in the very same military behavior by which their ancestors expressed *virtus*.

The Sallustian interpretation of *virtus* that ultimately arises from these passages is strikingly pessimistic and defeatist. In the narrative of *BC* 5.9-13.5, Ancient Romans’ expansion and protection of their borders was unproblematically linked to *virtus*, until their campaigns reached so far that Rome was not meaningfully challenged by any adversary. The example of Sulla’s army is used to show that Roman domination later made it possible for all Romans to be

made weak and effeminate under foreign influence. Earlier conquests are portrayed as having taken from later soldiers the opportunity to test their courage in battle and to have facilitated exposure to the decadent lifestyles of conquered peoples. In this way, Sallust depicts the logic by which *virtus* that is expressed through empire-building eventually reduces to its own opposite, namely, immorality charged with feminine implications.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the broad semantic range of the word *virtus*, this paper will not attempt to translate the word and thus impose upon it one English meaning. It may interest the reader that Viktor Pöschl (1940), among others, provided one definition of *virtus* in the writings of Sallust, and that Myles McDonnell (2006) has recently challenged Pöschl's claims.

<sup>2</sup> Cic. *De Imp. Cn. Pomp.* 28.2

<sup>3</sup> Caes. *BGall.* 1.1.5

<sup>4</sup> *Loc. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> *Hp.Aer.* 12, cited in Boyd 186

<sup>6</sup> McDonnell 357

<sup>7</sup> Sall. *BC* 6.5, 7.6-7, 9.2

<sup>8</sup> Sall. *BC* 7.1-2, 9.1-2. McDonnell 356-359 argues the opposite—that Sallust divides the meaning of *virtus* strictly into two connotations, one being martial and the other ethical—but to maintain this distinction often requires divorcing *virtus* from its context, especially in the Archaeology. In particular, he dismisses the explanatory force of the line “citizens competed with citizens concerning *virtus*” (*cives cum cives de virtute certabant*) in the context of the *boni mores* of the early Republic. He also chalks up to anomaly the ethical implications of statement that “for kings, good men are more suspicious than bad men, and the *virtus* of another person is always terrifying to them” (*regibus boni quam mali suspiciores sunt semperque eis aliena virtus formidulosa est*), which connects good men and *virtus* with the morally-approved act of causing fear in kings.

<sup>9</sup> Sall. *BC* 54.4

<sup>10</sup> Sall. *BC* 10.1

<sup>11</sup> Levene 178-179

<sup>12</sup> Levene 179, Sall. *BC* 10.2. In J.C. Rolfe and John T. Ramsey's translation for the Loeb Classical Library, *fortuna* is even rendered as “Fortune,” which at least hints at personification.

<sup>13</sup> Sall. *BC* 2.5

<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that many other interpretations of Sallust's use of *fortuna* have been posited. For an overview, see Levene 179.

<sup>15</sup> Sall. *BC* 10.2

<sup>16</sup> Sall. *BI* 41.2

<sup>17</sup> Boyd 186, Levene 179

<sup>18</sup> Sall. *BC* 10.3, 11.1. The near-synonymy of “desire for money” (*cupido pecuniae*) with “greed” (*avaritia*) and of “desire for authority” (*cupido imperi*) with “ambition” (*ambitio*) is established in more detail at 11.2-4, when Sallust offers approximate definitions of the terms.

<sup>19</sup> Sall. *BC* 11.1-2

<sup>20</sup> Sall. *BC* 9.2-4

<sup>21</sup> Sall. *BC* 11.3-5

<sup>22</sup> For instance, take Cat. 25.1, where Thallus is called both *cinaedus* and *mollis*.

<sup>23</sup> Boyd 190

<sup>24</sup> Boyd 186

<sup>25</sup> Boyd 187, 192-193

<sup>26</sup> Boyd 188, Sall. *BC* 12.1

<sup>27</sup> Sall. *BC* 12.2

<sup>28</sup> Sklenář 213

<sup>29</sup> Sall. *BC* 53.5