

Sulla and Delphi in Plutarch's *Life of Sulla*

Plutarch's *Life of Sulla* contains numerous passages that portray its subject in an unflattering light. In addition to his cruelty, one of Sulla's most defining traits is that he never knows quite how to behave properly. So, for example, once he has established control of Rome, he spends his time drinking with actors and neglects his official duties (2.2). In this paper, I focus on what is characterized as a particularly outrageous lapse of appropriate behavior on Sulla's part, namely his treatment of the treasures of Delphi in 12.3–9.

Sulla's dealings with Delphi occur during his siege of Athens in the war with Mithridates. Badly in need of money, Sulla turns his attention to sacred spaces. He asks the sanctuaries at Olympia, Epidaurus, and Delphi to send him their most valuable treasures. Plutarch does not say how Olympia and Delphi reacted to Sulla's demands, but the events at Delphi are described in detail. Both Caphis, whom Sulla sends to make sure the treasures get to him safely, and the officials at Delphi are clearly uncomfortable with Sulla's orders, and there is even a suggestion that Apollo is opposed to the removal of the treasure. Nevertheless, the goods are taken, and a silver vessel is even chopped to pieces for easier transport. It is clear that Sulla will take what he wants without any regard for Delphi's sacred status or the safety of the objects. At the end, his appropriation of the treasures for the war effort is characterized as unprecedented. Whereas the Roman generals of previous generations had treated the sanctuaries of Greece with respect, Sulla's behavior points to a new and dangerous development (12.6–9). Once more Sulla does not know how to behave appropriately, and this time others will follow in his tracks.

As I hope to show, however, the demands Sulla makes on Delphi are part of an established practice of using the wealth of temples and sanctuaries in the event of a public emergency. I shall first look at Plutarch's account of the events at Delphi in detail to show how the episode emphasizes Sulla's inappropriate behavior and lack of regard for the sacred. Charging someone with misappropriating sacred property is a common theme in Greek and Roman invective, and the *Life of Sulla* seems to follow this tradition. I shall then look at the evidence for the use of temple funds at a time of crisis in order to show that it is possible that Sulla's actions are neither unprecedented nor unusual. In the *Life of Sulla*, the sack of Athens follows seamlessly on the events at Delphi. This raises the possibility that Plutarch's Delphi

narrative distorts events and motivations in order to serve as an effective prelude to one of Sulla's most famous displays of madness and greed.