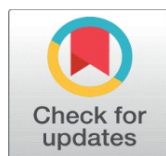


THE BATTLE OF CHAERONEA: 86 BCE

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ABSTRACT

In 86 BCE Proconsul Lucius Cornelius Sulla's (138-78 BCE) looked over the potential battlefield at the broad plain near Chaeronea. He heard horses neigh, and men rumble as they set up camp. Sulla knew the upcoming engagement of his 30,000 legionnaires against the 120,000-man army of Mithridates VI (135-78 BCE) (Appian 12.3.17, 12.6.41) of Pontus would be bloody, brutal, and deadly. General Archelaus commanded the Pontic forces. Sulla may have reflected on the cascade of events which placed him in this dire situation.

In 107 BCE. Consul Gaius Marius (157-86 BCE) initiated policies designed to enhance the efficacy of the Roman army. One of these reforms placed the responsibility to supply and manage an army under the authority of the commanding general, rather than the Consul and Senate. This change allowed charismatic, ambitious generals to divert the primary loyalty of soldiers to themselves rather than the State. Sulla used this change in loyalty to march on Rome in 88 BCE and 82 BCE. (Plutarch 2.3.1)

In 89 BCE Mithridates embarked on a policy of military expansionism. He invaded Bithynia and Cappadocia, even though Roman officials warned him to respect Bithynia's sovereignty. The Roman Senate declared war on Pontus, appointed Sulla to prosecute the war, and the First Mithridatic War began (89-84 BCE). (Appian 12.4.22, 12.5.30) Mithridates' army overran Roman provinces in Asia Minor. Cassius Dio reported: "All the Asiatic, at the bidding of Mithridates massacred the Romans." (Dio 31.101) Mithridates then invaded the Roman province of Greece. The seizure of Roman territory and murder of Roman citizens was a grievous affront to the honor of Senatus Populusque Romanus (the Senate and People of Rome). Mithridates must have known from the history of Carthage what fate awaited him and Pontus if his military adventurism failed. Either he must destroy the Roman Republic, or it would destroy Pontus and humiliate, then kill him. Control over the region of the Eastern Mediterranean was at stake. Civil War diverted Sulla's attention, but he finally advanced against Pontic armies in Greece in 87 BCE. He quickly drove two Mithridatic armies into the fortifications of Athens and the Piraeus. Then he successfully moved against these two fortifications. Archelaus escaped by sea to Boeotia. Sulla followed him with his army to Chaeronea, in central Greece. He had Legates Sulpicius Galba, Licinius Murena, and Lucius Hortensius under his command (Plutarch 15.17).

Keywords: Legates Sulpicius Galba, Pontic Forces, Licinius Murena

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. THE MAIN ADVERSARIES

Sulla was a Roman general and statesman. He was a noble of Patrician birth, but his family fell on hard times and Sulla knew poverty. Nevertheless, Sulla's burning ambition helped him to quickly rise through the *cursus honorum*. He won the first large scale civil war in Roman history and became the first man of the Republic to seize power through force. Sulla held the office of consul twice and revived the dictatorship. During the Social War (91-88 BCE) Rome faced a revolt among its previously loyal allies in Italy who demanded citizenship. Sulla inflicted decisive

defeats against the rebels in southern Italy, including a siege of Pompeii, and captured their strongholds. He established a reputation for ruthlessness and brutality in war and thereby became Rome's *legatus primus* (first general). The Social War ended when Roman authorities offered citizenship to those allies who remained loyal, and then offered it to rebels who laid down their arms to acknowledge Roman sovereignty. (Plutarch 1-10, Appian 1.41-53) (Orosius 5.18.14-25)

Archelaus was a Greek nobleman and general, who held the title of Court Philosopher (Philosopher of Law), in Mithridate's kingdom. (Plutarch 22.4) While his ancestor's pursued philhellenism as a means of attaining respectability and prestige among the Hellenistic kingdoms, Mithridates VI made use of Hellenism as a political tool. He welcomed Greeks, Romans, and Asians in his court. Archelaus helped launch Mithridates' successful military campaign by conquering most of the Roman Province of Asia. In 88 BCE Archelaus commanded a fleet and army to occupy Athens and much of the Roman Province of Greece. He also negotiated with Sulla the Peace Treaty of Dardanus in 85 BCE. The treaty forced Mithridates to give up large territories of his kingdom, pay an indemnity of 2,000 talents and give Rome 70 bronze-armored ships. Sulla, in return, allowed Mithridates to maintain the rest of his dominions and promised the Senate would pass a vote to make Mithridates an ally of Rome. (Plutarch 22.)

1.2. THE BATTLE OF CHAERONEA

The time for reflection was over. Sulla selected a camp site where the slope of the plain favored the Romans in maneuverability. Appian reported: "Archelaus was hedged in by rocks which would in no case allow his whole army to act in concert." (Appian 12.42) Sulla built entrenchments to protect his flanks against envelopment by the Mithridatic cavalry and erected palisades along the front of his position to provide protection against scythed chariots. [Hackett \(1989\)](#)

The Pontic army appeared on the battlefield, shouting as they formed up in order. "As their ranks swung and surged to and fro they presented a fearful sight like a flaming fire, what with the flashing of their armor." (Plutarch 15) Sulla spoke to his soldiers and encouraged them to face the enemy with courage. (Plutarch 17) He drew up the Roman battle line with cavalry on both wings. Sulla took command of the right wing and ordered Murena to lead the left wing. He placed cohorts of reserves, under the command of Galba and Hortensius, on high ground in the rear to guard against enveloping movements from the flanks. Sulla also sent a contingent of men above the enemy position at Thurium to either hurl stones at the Pontic soldiers or drive them down into the plain. (Plutarch 17)

Archelaus ordered a cavalry attack, and Sulla's legions formed into squares. The legionnaire's swords bristled between tightly packed shields. This formation discouraged the horses' attack, and the cavalry fled and "shattered among the rocks." (Appian 12.6.42) Meanwhile, the contingency at the heights of Thurium rushed down to strike the Pontic forces and killed 3,000 of them. (Plutarch 18) Undeterred, and confident because of his superior numbers, Archelaus launched a charge of 60 scythed chariots. (Appian 12.6.42) The whirling blades of the scythes extended more than three feet and could sever human flesh. Trumpets sounded and the Romans opened their ranks to let the chariots pass harmlessly through. The rear echelon surrounded the charioteers and their javelins struck and annihilated all of them. (Appian 12.6.42) [Warry \(1980\)](#)

Archelaus now closed with his main body of infantry and cavalry. His superior numbers caused the Roman lines to buckle. The Pontic infantry held their pikes in front of them at full length and locked their shields together. The ground was uneven, so the Roman lines moved between the pikes, struggled close to the enemy ranks, and gradually pushed them back. A constant stream of javelins and firebolts from the Roman rear area aided their advance. The Pontic cavalry forced the Roman position into two parts and surrounded them. The Romans fought on all sides, as Archelaus' led an attack on the rear guard. Sulla came to their aid with a cavalry assault. Sulla led the cavalry and two reserve cohorts to strike the enemy and throw them into confusion. He broke through their lines, aided by Murena's forces on the left wing. When Archelaus' two wings gave way, his center formation could no longer hold its ground and the Pontic retreat turned into a rout. A great slaughter followed. Only 10,000 of the 120,000-fighting force survived. The Roman loss was only 12-13 soldiers. (Appian 12.6.44-45, Plutarch 19) Chaeronea was one of the greatest one-sided victories in history. [Matyszak \(2003\)](#)

1.3. THE AFTERMATH

Mithridates then sent Archelaus 80,000 of his best troops into Chalcis in Euboea aboard a large fleet. The army marched to and invaded, then occupied Boeotia. Then they encamped near Orchomenus in central Greece. Sulla followed and encamped his troops close to the enemy. Sulla began to dig ditches to cut the enemy off from hard ground suitable for cavalry and to force them back towards the marshes. Archelaus realized Sulla's strategy and attacked the Roman position. The sheer numbers of the enemy caused many legionnaires to retreat. Sulla rallied his retreating men and shouted: "As for me, Romans, I can die here with honor; but as for you, when you are asked where it was that you betrayed your commander-in-chief, remember and say: 'It was Orchomenus'." (Plutarch 21) His words had the right effect. Those that were retreating turned and fought. (Plutarch 21)

Sulla mounted a counterattack and routed the Pontic forces. A second attack, led to a similar fate. Diogenes, stepson of Archelaus, died in the fighting. Sulla assaulted the enemy forces, killed 15,000 men, and captured their camp. Plutarch reported: "The marshes were filled with their blood and the lakes with their dead bodies." (Plutarch 21.4) Mithridates lost 160,000 men during the war and feared a continuation of this trend. Appian reported that: "The king yielded to his fears and consented to the terms offered by Archelaus through the Peace Treaty of Dardanus. The treaty outraged Sulla's troops who believed that its terms were too lenient on Mithridates. Sulla's oratory caused his men to assent to the treaty. (Plutarch 24). A relieved Mithridates went back to his paternal kingdom of Pontus as his sole possession." This brought an end to the ambitions of Mithridates' ambitions in Europe and the First Mithridatic War. (Plutarch 20-21) (Appian 12.49)

Mithridates engaged the Romans in two more wars: The Second Mithridatic War (83-81 BCE) and the Third Mithridatic War (75-65 BCE). After being ambushed and utterly defeated by Gnaeus Pompey (106-48 BCE) at the Battle of Lycus in 66 BCE, Mithridates escaped to the Crimea, where he committed suicide two years later. [Rosenstein \(2013\)](#)

2. CONCLUSION

Lucius Sulla lived during a time of treacherous political intrigues and brutal warfare. He demonstrated great military and political skills as commander and politician. One military tactic that served him well was to dig ditches and earthworks

on each side of his army, to force the enemy to directly engage his legions and to prevent them from outflanking his position. His march on Rome marked the beginning of the collapse of the Roman Republic. Julius Caesar did likewise when he crossed the Rubicon and entered the city in 49 BCE. These acts produced chaos and paved the way for the ascent of Augustus Caesar (27 BCE-CE 14) as the first Roman Emperor. The Battle of Chaeronea, and his other victories, demonstrate that Sulla was one of the great military leaders of ancient history. Sulla, as well as other military commanders who preceded and followed him, owed much to the skill of the disciplined Roman legionnaires. These men eventually conquered and controlled the entire Mediterranean Sea and its surrounding areas.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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