Sallust, The War with Jugurtha LXXXI.1

Jugurtha's speech against Rome

Name of the author: Sallust
Date: 41 BCE to 40 BCE
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Category: Roman

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Title of work: The War with Jugurtha
Reference: LXXXI.1

Commentary:
This text is an excerpt from Sallust’s monograph The War with Jugurtha, which narrates the war led by Rome in Africa between 111 and 105 BCE against the Numidian prince Jugurtha. At the beginning of this work, Sallust explains that he chose this theme because it was “a great and terrible conflict of varying fortune,” and because it challenged “the insolence of the nobles” (V.1). Actually, according to Sallust’s global conception of the history of Rome, the final victory of Rome during the third Punic War and the destruction of Carthage would have marked the beginning of Rome’s decline (for a quite similar perspective, see the fears of Scipio Aemilianus expressed in Polybius, Histories XXXVIII.21-22). For him, the disappearance of Rome’s worst enemy and threat would have led the Romans, and especially the members of the nobility, to have decadent, corrupt and lazy behaviours (The Conjuration of Catilina X.1; The War with Jugurtha XLI.2). In addition, Sallust’s choice to deal with the conflict with Jugurtha may have been motivated by some personal reasons. Sallust was sent to Africa as an officer of Caesar in 46 BCE and he acted against Juba, the grandson of Jugurtha’s half-brother, who supported Pompey against Caesar during the civil war. After the campaign for Caesar, Sallust was appointed governor of the new province of Africa Nova. These facts also explain why Sallust chose to narrate this conflict (Ramsey, Sallust. The War, p. xxxix).

This text is a speech of the Numidian prince Jugurtha that he addressed to the king of Mauretania Bocchus around 108/107 BCE. Actually, after having suffered several defeats against the Roman armies, Jugurtha retreated back to the territories of the Gaetuli and organized an alliance with Bocchus. As Thucydides, Sallust is an adept at inserting invented direct speeches within the historical narrative, rather than transcribing this speech in the oblique form (Ramsey, Sallust. The War, p. xlv). In addition, he is among the first Roman historians who “put such complaints in the mouths of Rome’s enemies” in his works. Before him, such a similar literary technique is attested with Caesar and Cicero only (for the references, see Paul, A Historical Commentary, p. 201). After him, it is been reused by authors like Trogus Pompeius, in his invented speech of Mithridates (Justin, Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus XXXVIII 3.10-7.10), Tacitus, in his speech of the chief of the Caledonians, Calgacus (Tacitus, Agricola XXX-XXXII), and Josephus, in his speech of Agrippa II in which he tries to dissuade the Jews from waging war against Rome (Josephus, Jewish War II.345-401). Even if in his speech Josephus’s Agrippa admits the harshness of Rome’s administration in the Eastern provinces, his criticism towards the Romans is different from that of Mithridates or of Calgacus. Actually, he criticizes some individual cases — those of some dishonest Roman procurators —, but he does not condemn the Romans in general. On the contrary, he is against any generalized criticism towards them or towards the emperor. We will see that most of the anti-Roman motifs exposed in the speech of Sallust’s Jugurtha are very similar to those appearing in Sallust’s Letter of Mithridates, a letter, probably wholly invented by Sallust, that the king of Pontus would have sent to the Parthian king Arsaces so as to convince him to join him in his war against Rome (see Sallust, Histories VI (CUF) = IV.60 (Loeb) = Letter of Mithridates; on the similarities between the two texts, Adler, Valorizing, p. 18, 30). Keeping in mind these various examples of speeches of enemies of Rome in which Rome is criticized, we will study this speech of Jugurtha invented by Sallust to highlight the main themes of the anti-Roman propaganda used in it.

Sallust’s Jugurtha starts with a general anti-Roman assessment according to which “the Romans are unjust” (Romanos iniustos ... esse). Such a general moral criticism does not explicitly appear in Sallust’s Letter of Mithridates, but it is a common leitmotiv of Sallust himself when he regrets, in his monographs, the moral
decadence of the ending Republic. For instance, in *The Conjuration of Catilina*, he writes: “The men of today, on the contrary, basest of creatures, with supreme wickedness are robbing our allies of all that those heroes in the hour of victory had left them; they act as though the one and only way to rule were to wrong (*iniuriam facere*)” (Loeb’s translation of John C. Rolfe; Sallust, *The Conjuration of Catilina* XII.5). In another speech of the *The War with Jugurtha*, namely the speech of the tribe of the Plebs C. Memmius to the Roman people, C. Memmius regrets the “absence of justice” (*ius nullum*; Sallust, *The War with Jugurtha* XXXI) of his time. Thus, the idea that the Roman elite living at the end of the second century BCE had unjust behaviours, especially when its members had to deal with foreign provinces or lands, is commonplace in Sallust’s vision of the evolution of the Roman Republic. However, one difference can be noticed if we compare his approach to that of Jugurtha. For the Numidian king, it is the Romans in their entirety who are unjust. His judgement is peremptory and unequivocal. The motif of the injustice of the Romans may have been also present in Cicero’s third book of his treaty *On the Republic* (Paul, *A Historical Commentary*, p. 201). Cicero presents antithetic speeches of Philus and Laelius about the moral issue posed by conquests and the constitution of an empire. Philus tries to show that it would be impossible to govern without injustice. In a passage of this discussion – which corresponds to a lost part of Cicero’s original text which has been summarised and rewritten by Lactantius (Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* V, 16) – Philus recounts the sayings that the Greek philosopher Carneades would have had during some of his lectures on justice held at Rome in 155 BCE and whose aim would have been to criticize Rome’s expansionism and to present it as unjust (Cicero, *On the Republic* III.8.12). Nevertheless, Jean-Louis Ferrary has rightly shown that the criticism expressed by Carneades, and known through Lactantius’s rewriting of Cicero’s words, could not be taken at face value. Actually, Jean-Louis Ferrary has demonstrated that Lactantius may have taken Cicero’s words too literally and that Cicero may have distorted the position and ideas of Carneades about Roman imperialism to fuel the debate between Philus and Laelius (Ferrary, *Philhellénisme*, p. 351-363).

The second anti-Roman motif that Sallust’s *Jugurtha* alludes to is Roman greed. Here denounced as a “boundless greed” (*profunda avaritía*). It clearly recalls Sallust’s *Letter of Mithridates* where it is written that the Romans would always have one reason (*causa*) to wage war against all the peoples: their “boundless desire for dominion and riches” (*cupido profunda imperi et divitiarum*, IV.60.5). At the end of his speech, Jugurtha adds that the Romans will attack every people on earth on the sole criteria that they have a great amount of riches: “Now, it is he himself (who is the enemy of the Romans), a short time before, the Carthaginians and king Perseus were; and in the future, whoever seem to them to be the most prosperous will be the enemy of the Romans.” Such a statement is also present in Sallust’s *Letter of Mithridates*: “The Romans have weapons against all men, the sharpest against those whose defeat yields the greatest spoils (*spolia maxuma*)...” (IV.60.20), and it appears also in Trogus/Justin’s speech of Mithridates – which is largely influenced by Sallust’s letter – especially when the author compares the Romans to sanguinary wolves (Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus* XXXVIII.6.8).

Eric Adler has rightly noticed that in other speeches inserted in *The War with Jugurtha* and pronounced by Romans, the rapacity of Roman aristocrats and leaders is often denounced. This is obvious in the speeches of C. Memmius (XXXI) and of C. Marius (LXXV), in which the personal avarice of the Roman commanders is presented as the main cause of the difficulties of Rome against Jugurtha, as many of them accept money from the Numidian king instead of fulfilling their mission. However, the attacks against greed have a more general tone and a different goal in the Sallustean speeches pronounced by non-Romans. Actually, we can see that in this speech of Jugurtha, it is the Romans, namely the whole Roman people, who are criticized and presented as a greedy people. An identical process appears in Sallust’s *Letter of Mithridates*. In addition, Jugurtha does not make any distinction between his time and a time during which the Romans would have not been concerned by greed and cupidity – a time which, according to Sallust, would have existed before the Second Punic War (Adler, *Valorizing*, p. 34).

Finally, if in the Roman speeches criticizing the rapacity of the Roman *nobles*, it is the “Roman inaction” which is denounced and presented as damaging for Rome – as Jugurtha remains a threat – (Adler, *Valorizing*, p. 28-29), in the speeches pronounced by enemies of Rome, it is “Rome’s unbridled acquisitiveness” which is denounced (Adler, *Valorizing*, p. 31). Thus, by making the motif of Roman greed commonplace in both Roman and barbarian speeches, Sallust may have wanted to present it as a main cause of the decline of Republican Rome. However, the speech of the barbarians and of the Roman ‘non-decadent’ leaders are not placed by Sallust at the same level. Implicitly, the barbarians – that could be Jugurtha or Mithridates – are presented as having an unequivocal judgement on the Romans and do not seem able to perceive or to recognize the historical evolution of Rome. Thus, Sallust may have wanted to present the barbarians as convinced that Rome was greedy by essence.

The third anti-Roman motif mentioned by Sallust’s *Jugurtha* is the Roman lust for conquests and territorial domination: “To wage war against Bocchus, they have the same motive (*causam*) as for one with himself or with other peoples, namely the lust for dominion (*lubidinem imperitandi*)...” Through this sentence, Sallust explicitly presents Rome’s *lubido imperitandi*, “lust for dominion,” as its main motivation for waging wars against so many
peoples. A very similar idea is expressed in Sallust’s Letter of Mithridates, when the king of Pontus presents the cupidum imperi, “the desire for dominion,” as the main reason for the Romans to wage wars (IV.60.5). Such a criticism also recalls one of the arguments used by the chief of the Arverni, Critognatus, in Caesar’s work, The Gallic War, when he claims that the dream of the Romans is to settle in the lands and towns of powerful nations and “to bind upon them a perpetual slavery” (his aeternam iniungere servitutem; Caesar, The Gallic War VII, 77; see Fuchs, Der geistige, p. 47). One major consequence of such a lust for conquests on the part of the Romans is presented at the very beginning of Jugurtha’s speech: they logically become “the common foes of all mankind” (communis omnium hostis). By wanting to build a universal empire, Romans would thus have become “universal foes.” A quite similar idea is implicitly mentioned in Sallust’s Letter of Mithridates, as the king of Pontus claims that the Romans “have been established to serve as a plague upon the whole world (pesti orbis terrarum)” (IV.60.17).

The fourth anti-Roman motif that Sallust’s Jugurtha mentions to denigrate the Romans is their aversion towards kings: “To wage war against Bocchus, they have the same motive as for one with himself or with other peoples, namely the lust for dominion because of which they are adversaries of all the monarchies” (eandem illos causam belli cum Boccho habere, quam secum et cum aliis gentibus, lubidinem imperitandi, quis omnia regna adversa sint). By highlighting the contrast between the Romans and the kings and by presenting Rome’s expansion as an infringement on the power and territories of the various monarchies, Sallust uses a classical motif of anti-Roman propaganda, namely the fact that the Romans had some special aversion for kings which would have motivated them to conquer their kingdoms. Such an idea appears for instance in Sallust’s Letter of Mithridates, when the king of Pontus warns the Parthian king against the Romans “being men who are prevented by nothing human or divine from (...) considering as their enemies all powers not at their mercy and especially monarchies (regna)” (IV.60.17). In the same passage, Mithridates also asserts that the Romans have a “tradition” (morem suum) of “overthrow[ing] all the monarchies” (monia regna subvortundi, IV.60.15). Such a theme is also developed in various speeches of enemies of Rome composed by Trogus Pompeius (Justin, Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus XXIX.2.2-6; XXXVIII.6.1). Moreover, even if Sallust’s Jugurtha asserts that kings have been and are actually the first target of the Romans, he ends his oration by saying that the Romans will attack any people on earth solely because of the riches it may provide.

To conclude, the similarities with Sallust’s Letter of Mithridates, but also with other speeches of enemies of Rome, show that the anti-Roman themes exposed here were rhetorical commonplaces which corresponded to what was expected from a Latin author when he had to give voice to an enemy of Rome vituperating Rome’s hegemony and practices in foreign lands. In addition, it is obvious that there is a real similarity between the complaints against Roman greed and injustice in the barbarians’ speeches and in the speeches pronounced by true Roman leaders. However, these criticisms vary in nature and degree of criticism. From the Romans’ perspective, Rome has declined, but still has been an ideal state in the past. In the speeches attributed to barbarians, as in this passage, the Romans are presented as bad by nature. The anti-Romanism expressed in such barbarian speeches is based on generalising statements and does not take time and evolution into account.

Keywords in the original language:

- avaritia
- bellum
- Bocchus
- Carthaginensis
- causa
- exercitus
- fides
- gens
- hostis
- imperio
- iniustus
- Jugurtha
- lubido
- opulens
- oratio
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- Perses
- regnum
- rex
- Romani

Thematic keywords in English:

- anti-monarchism
- criticism of Rome
- enemy
- injustice
- Jugurtha
- Roman aggressiveness
- Roman expansion
- Roman greed
- Roman people
- Roman violence

Bibliographical references:

- Paul, George M., A Historical Commentary on Sallust’s Bellum Jugurthinum (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1984)
- Fuchs, Harald, Der geistige Widerstand gegen Rome in der antiken Welt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & co, 1938)

Other sources connected with this document: Text

Justin, Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus XXXVIII.3.10-7.10

Mithridates’s speech against Rome

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Text

Tacitus, Agricola XXIX-XXXII

Calgacus’s speech against Rome.

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Text

Caesar, The Gallic War VII.77

Critognatus’s speech against Rome

- Read more about Caesar, The Gallic War VII.77