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Sulla and the practices of anchoring in political discourse: cultural memory and the use of symbols in Roman Athens

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Abstract

This paper discusses strategies of negotiating Roman control over Athens in a contested political sphere during the first century BCE. It explores the language in Athenian political discourse, political reactions to Roman power, and the ideological grounds for decision-making in the pre- and post-Sulla periods, tracing continuity in practices and focusing on the iconographical choices of the *New Style* coinage of Mentor and Moschion. To that end, it examines the different articulations of power as manifested at a symbolic level; it traces reforms in Athenian civic narratives in a period of increasing Roman activity in the East; it highlights links between Athenian cultural memory and decision-making during this period; finally, it explains the ways the embedded, new narratives were disseminated. The evidence shows significant political fluidity in first-century Athens and mirrors the political elites' understanding of the role of the past and the need for constructing new political narratives depending on circumstances.

Keywords

Roman Athens; Sulla; siege of Athens; coinage; political discourse; memory; anchoring innovation

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Introduction

On 1 March 86, Lucius Cornelius Sulla entered Athens as a conqueror, having besieged Athens since the previous autumn.¹ In the long Hellenistic period, it was an unprecedented event for the Athenians, who had tried to regain their status and autonomy numerous times against their Macedonian overseers. Indeed, this was the first time the city was besieged and partially destroyed since the Persian Wars.² Arguably, this was a shock to the Athenians and a turning point in the history of the *polis*, which felt for the first time the brute power of the Romans.

First, I argue that, notwithstanding the reception of the siege in later sources and the creation of a literary *topos* with seemingly exaggerated narratives (Kuin 2018),³ the siege and the partial destruction of the *polis* were not an eventuality or a threat but a reality. Unlike the events after the Battle of Chaironeia (338), for example, when the Athenians panicked at the possibility of Philippos II's attack, the siege by Sulla and its horrors created a reality similar in magnitude and perception to the destruction of the city during the Persian Wars. In the aftermath of the siege and the capture of Athens by Sulla, the Athenians should have felt as humiliated as they might have when they were forced to demolish their Long Walls at the end of the Peloponnesian War (404). The destroyed buildings, many of which were only much later repaired,⁴ would have been a constant reminder of the changing fates of the *polis*, thus acting as 'sites of memory'.⁵

Then, this paper focuses on how the Athenians negotiated with Sulla and the Romans in the wake of their defeat. It is a preliminary inquiry at the level of incorporating ambient developments, notably the violent seizing of the *polis* by Sulla, into civic narratives based on their suitability in establishing a shared space, an area of political discourse. This common ground does not need to be (and if fact it is not) only verbal. Symbolism often plays an essential role and could have worked, in this case, towards (re)building the relationship between the Athenians and the Romans via serving both Athenian and Roman objectives.

Moreover, the paper investigates how and to what extent the Athenian society accepted the harsh realities imposed by Sulla by effectively integrating them into long-standing civic conceptual categories and values. Under this perspective, I also discuss the existence of complex narrative(s) within Athenian political discourse that can embed, with different depth, changes according to civic needs. In other words, I am looking at the

1 Plut. *Sull.* 12–14; App. *Mith.* 30–41.

2 Two instances of destruction during the Persian Wars, in 480 and 479, Hdt. 8.53; 9.13. This excludes the razing of the cemetery for building material to strengthen the city walls after the Battle of Chaironeia (338) in anticipation of Philippos' advance, Dem. 18.248; Aesch. 3.236; Lycurg. 1.44; cf. Conwell (2008: pp. 133–159).

3 Cf. Eckert (2016: pp. 86–102).

4 Most of the buildings were repaired, with some probability, in the second century CE; see Hoff (1997); Parigi (2019).

5 For the destruction in Athens see Hoff (1997: pp. 40–41); Ruggeri (2006); Mango (2010: pp. 117–125); Eckert (2016: pp. 95–97); Parigi (2019).

very instruments of anchoring that the Athenians utilised to highlight their competence and long tradition. Anchoring practices are common in different societies, groups, and periods (Sluiter 2017), and the Athenians are not an exception; they have had, as I argue, much experience (not unlike other ancient and modern societies) in finding some value in contemporary realities, selecting some aspects, and integrating them into familiar narratives, building upon their cultural memory.

The very concept of anchoring innovations is, of course, central in creating the common language (in a broad sense) employed for the negotiation of power and the construction of new, familiar narratives that can work with different audiences. At the same time, symbolism is also inextricably linked to political discourse.⁶ It often frames the language of negotiation (and, in turn, is framed by it), and it can take various forms. From linguistic aspects and the use of vocabulary to ideological constructs, symbols can be abstract and remain as ambiguous and open to interpretation as words can sometimes be. Thus, this paper explores the notion of this 'language' by looking at symbolisms rather than actual language and opens the door for complementary research on other elements of this 'discourse', of the dynamic processes of meaning and interpretation that always imply intentionality and contextual connections.

The paper begins with a discussion of Athenian practices of anchoring innovations in the Hellenistic period that paved the ground for the developments in first-century BCE Athens. The aim is to illustrate the prevailing civic narrative built upon the long-standing cultural memory of the Athenians. Then, I move to symbolism and examine the so-called Athenian *New Style* coinage minted during the Mithridatic Wars to trace how narratives changed and to detect the agency behind these changes. Finally, epigraphy offers some support as an afterword to this paper and a precursor of further research on the multi-faceted manifestation of 'language' in Roman Athens' narratives.

Athenian Practices of Anchoring: A View from the Second Century

To discuss what may have happened in early Roman Athens at the time of the Sullan affair, it is beneficial, I believe, to look further back in the past of the *polis* and explore continuation. The previous two centuries provide context and reveal long-term practices and conventions.

From an external viewpoint, Athens was seen as a central *topos* of power, with a long tradition of playing a protagonistic role in Greek affairs and holding a prominent cultural position that could be traced to the fifth century. The idea of Athens as the cultural capital of the Greek world was, of course, disseminated as early as the fifth century by Athenians and non-Athenians alike in ideological and practical terms. Many non-Athenians also acknowledged its cultural predominance and visited Athens for their education and cultural milieu; pursued diplomatic relations with the Athenians; and demonstrated

6 For example, recent work on the broader role of 'discourse' and the understanding of language as integral part of politics and culture, see Hölscher (2004; 2018). For a recent example of framing art and text in linguistic and semantic terms see Luci (2018); Rous (2019).

their benevolence by the numerous benefactions (Pagkalos 2018: pp. 81, 96–106).⁷ According to Plutarch, Demetrios Poliorketes wished to capture Athens in the 300s for its strategic importance and its cultural status, for it was ‘the beacon-tower of the inhabited world’.⁸ Interestingly, this cultural *status quo* was directly referenced by Sulla (also passed down to us by Plutarch) as the main reason for sparing the city from destruction; but I will return to this point later.⁹

With the gradual loss of military power due to the changing political landscape of the Hellenistic period, Athens became entangled in an intermittent struggle between autonomy and subjugation. The cultural role of Athens became even more critical and pronounced during the Hellenistic period, informing civic narratives that contextualised, by and large, the political discourse and was cultivated domestically and accordingly disseminated abroad. Even if not all Athenians agreed on the details, a shared self-perception, both as a physical space and an imagined community, was shaped through historical developments and further supported by the *polis*’ institutions. It was the result of long memory processes and, as such, selective in details and malleable. Two key concepts were pronounced during the Hellenistic period: (i) the connection to a glorious past when the Athenians had fought and won many battles to protect the other Greeks, but most importantly their *polis*; which led to (ii) the *polis*’ democratic polity.¹⁰ The Athenians increasingly appropriated, via various forms, the historical developments into Athenian civic rhetoric that served the *polis*, its citizens and external aims.

To return to the chronological framework, the relationship between Rome and Athens began when the Athenians sided with the Romans and Attalos I of Pergamon against the

7 Elements of Athenian rhetoric along the same lines of argument feature in the stance the Athenian embassy observed when they attempted to reconcile with Sulla and avert the destruction of their *polis*. The envoys narrated the glorious past of Athens, starting with Theseus and Persian Wars, both very central to Athenian self-perception and political narratives, cf. Munson (2017); Yates (2019). See Plut. *Sull.* 13.4: ὁψὲ δὲ ἦδη που μόλις ἐξέπεμψεν ὑπὲρ εἰρήνης δύο ἢ τρεῖς τῶν συμποτῶν πρὸς οὓς οὐδὲν ἀξιοῦντας σωτήριον, ἀλλὰ τὸν Θεσέα καὶ τὸν Εὐμόλπον καὶ τὰ Μηδικὰ σεμνολογουμένους ὁ Σύλλας εἶπεν [trans. (Aristion), after much time, at last, sent out two or three of his drinking fellows to ask for peace, to whom Sulla, when they made no demand towards saving the city but talked eloquently about Theseus, and Eumolpos, and the Persian Wars, said...].

8 Plut. *Demetr.* 8.2: τὰς δὲ Ἀθήνας, ὥσπερ σκοπὴν τῆς οἰκουμένης, ταχὺ τῇ δόξῃ διαπυρσεύειν εἰς ἅπαντας ἀνθρώπους τὰς πράξεις [trans. (Antigonos said) that Athens, which was the beacon-tower of the inhabited world, would quickly disseminate the glory of their deed to all mankind]; cf. Diod. 20.45.1. See also Kralli (2016: esp. pp. 164–165).

9 Plut. *Sull.* 14.5: αὐτὸς τε μεστὸς ὦν ἦδη τῆς τιμωρίας, ἐγκώμιόν τι τῶν παλαιῶν Ἀθηναίων ὑπεῖπὼν ἔφη χαρίζεσθαι πολλοῖς μὲν ὀλίγους, ζῶντας δὲ τεθνηκόσιν. [trans. (Sulla) being satisfied with the punishment (of the Athenians), after some praising for the ancient Athenians, he said that he forgave the few in favour of the many, the living in favour of the dead.]. Cf. Kuin (2018) who interprets the sentiments of Plutarch (among other sources) as ‘inventions’ based on emotional and political intents of the Athenocentrism of the late first and early second century CE Romans. Eckert (2016: pp. 86–102), on the other hand, discusses the events as part of Sulla’s attempt to construct his own version of the past events, transmitted differently than the ancient authors.

10 Cf. Hoff & Rotroff (1997); Canevaro & Gray (2018); Pagkalos (2018: p. 55; Forthcoming), with ample bibliography.

Antigonid king Philippos V in the Second Macedonian War (c. 200–196). Livy described the events in his *Ab Urbe Condita* (31.44.2–9):¹¹

[2] *tum vero Atheniensium civitas, cui odio in Philippum per metum iam diu moderata erat, id omne in auxilii praesentis spem effudit. [3] nec umquam ibi desunt linguae promptae ad plebem concitandam; quod genus cum in omnibus liberis civitatibus, tum praecipue Athenis, ubi oratio plurimum pollet, favore multitudinis alitur. [4] rogationem extemplo tulerunt plebesque scivit, ut Philippi statuae, imagines omnes nominaque earum, item maiorum eius virile ac muliebre secus omnium tollerentur delerenturque diesque festi, sacra, sacerdotes, quae ipsius maiorumque eius honoris causa instituta essent, omnia profanarentur; [5] loca quoque, in quibus positum aliquid inscriptumve honoris eius causa fuisset, detestabilia esse [...]* [8] *si quis contra ignominiam prove honore eius dixisset fecissetve, qui occidisset eum, iure caesurum. postremo inclusum, ut omnia, quae adversus Pisisratidas decreta quondam erant, eadem in Philippo servarentur. [9] Athenienses quidem litteris verbisque, quibus solis valent, bellum adversus Philippum gerebant.*

[2] Then indeed the people of Athens, in view of the forthcoming help, fully indulged the hatred for Philippos, which had long been keeping restrained due to fear [3] The city does not lack tongues ready to incite the masses; and this phenomenon is encouraged by popular applause, in all free states, but especially in Athens, where oratory is particularly influential. [4] The Athenians immediately formulated a proposal, which the people ratified, that all statues of Philippos, all representations of him, and their inscriptions should be removed and destroy, together with those of all his ancestors, male and female and that all the feast-days, religious rites and priesthoods which had been established in honour the same Philippos or his ancestors should be abolished; [5] even the places in which any memorials or inscriptions in his honour had been set up should be accursed [...] [8] Finally, it was added that all the decrees which had once been passed against the Peisistratidai should be kept in force in the case of Philippos. [9] This was the Athenians' war against Philippos, conducted by means of letters and words, which constitute their sole strength.

The passage invites lengthy analysis, but for the purpose of this paper, I want to focus on three points for the sake of brevity and argument. First, the Athenians exercised their favourite pastime: participation in the *Ekklesia* and decision-making. Indeed, the Athenians lived in a more or less democratic polity since 229, when they bribed the Macedonian commander away and freed their *polis* from Antigonid control.¹² Second, the text records a case of *damnatio memoriae*, whereupon the Athenians anchored the changes in a radical manner. They erased the names of Macedonian kings from all public records, textual (inscriptions) and visual (inscriptions and removal of statues), altering the very landscape of Athens. They also removed from the list of tribes the two Macedonian-inspired tribes, *Antigonis* and *Demetrius*, created more than a century earlier to honour Antigonos Monophthalmos and Demetrios Poliorketes respectively for the liberation of the

¹¹ Translation adapted from Evan T. Sage (LCL 295).

¹² Ferguson (1911: pp. 205–206); Habicht (2003: pp. 52–53); Worthington (2021: pp. 132–136).

polis from Kassandros (307/6).¹³ Finally, we observe the association of the enemy – that is Philippos V, the penultimate ruler of the Macedonian kingdom and the major force opposing the Romans in the First and Second Macedonian Wars – to the Peisistratids. The tyrants of Athens were prominent *Others* in the constitutional prehistory of the *polis* and of democracy, the symbol of all things terrible.¹⁴

The passage highlights the Athenian response in terms of political language and diplomatic skill. Earlier in the same book, Livy (31.15.6–7) lists the honours that the Athenians conferred upon king Attalos I and the Rhodians. In response to the benefactions of Attalos, the Athenians created a new tribe, *Attalis*.¹⁵ Thus, at around the same time, the Athenians removed the Macedonian tribes from the top of their tribal list but opted for a new tribe to acknowledge the benefactions of the Pergamene king. In 224/3, the Athenians resorted to the same process for another king, Ptolemaios III Euergetes of Egypt, and created the tribe *Ptolemais* in his honour.¹⁶ Thus, in all cases, the Athenians took firm political action – inscribing their benefactors to every aspect of public life, from the political to the religious level. Successive reshuffling of tribe names and political re-organisation constitute the epitome of anchoring practices.¹⁷ Much more than a reaction based on munificence, framed by the rules of reciprocity, this recurring practice reveals the central issue at stake: the struggle for autonomy and freedom of the Athenians against opposing forces.

Looking at Coins: Sulla, the *Stephanephoroi*, and Symbolisms

In the aftermath of Sulla's siege and the partial destruction of the *polis*, autonomy and freedom were again under threat, and possibly the Athenians had felt this was the case even before the coming of Sulla. There is undoubtedly something substantial behind their choice of siding with Mithridates against the Romans, despite the benefits of their close relationship with the Romans till then.¹⁸ Apparently, the Athenians believed that the Roman hegemony was collapsing due to the rise of Mithridates and attempted to do away with the Romans' soft control over their *polis* affairs and regain full autonomy, supported by the king of Pontos.¹⁹ Aristion, the Athenian magistrate (c. 88), openly

13 Habicht (1997: pp. 196–197); Mikalson (1998: pp. 186–188).

14 Taylor (1991); Azoulay (2017: p. 3 and throughout).

15 Cf. *Syll.*³ 589; Polyb. 16.25–26. Habicht (1990); Worthington (2021: pp. 149–150).

16 Habicht (1992: pp. 74–75); Mikalson (1998: pp. 178–179); Worthington (2021: pp. 139–140).

17 Pagkalos (2018: pp. 92–94).

18 The Athenians were by all probability a *civitas foederata et libera* (allied and free city) from around the Aitolian War (c. 191–188); see Habicht (1997: pp. 212–213); Worthington (2021: pp. 163–180).

19 Athen. 5.212a: ταῦτα οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι διεκόμπουν τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἡγεμονίαν καταλελῶσθαι πεπιστευκότες; cf. Poseid. *FGrHist* 87 F 36. Habicht (1997: pp. 298–300); Kuin (2018: pp. 618–619); Henderson (2020: pp. 278–280); Worthington (2021: pp. 203–205).

supported Mithridates' plans. Sulla, who was dispatched to deal with Mithridates, soon focused his attempts on Athens to calm the revolutionary ideas of the Greeks.²⁰

After the fall of Athens, possibly in 84/3, the Athenians minted a limited series of coins following the *New Style* (or stephanephoric) civic coinage but with an intriguing addition on the reverse (Figure 1).²¹ There we find the owl standing on an amphora and, on its right, two figures standing next to each other in a fighting stance. The right figure is presented holding a sword on its right hand, moving forward on a thrusting move; the left figure holds a sword on its left hand, while a *chlamys* is wrapped around its arm. It is hard to miss the figures' identity; these are, of course, the tyrannicides, Harmodios and Aristogeiton – the celebrated symbols of democracy. The figures copy the sculptural pairing of the tyrannicides directly from the statue of Kritios and Nesiotes.²² The reverse also bears the inscriptions: ΑΘΕ[ΝΑΙΟΝ] on top and the names of two magistrates, ΜΕΝΤΩΡ and ΜΟΣΧΙΩΝ, below, all within wreath. Finally, in the obverse of the coin, we find the typical iconography of New-Style Athenian coins, the helmeted head of Athena looking to the right (Figure 1).



Figure 1: AR Athenian New-Style tetradrachm (17,42g; c. 84/3 BC?). Obv. Helmeted head of Athena to right. Rev. Owl standing on amphora, with Harmodios and Aristogeiton on the right. ΑΘΕ[ΝΑΙΟΝ] on top and the names of two magistrates ΜΕΝΤΩΡ and ΜΟΣΧΙΩΝ below, all within wreath. **Source:** ANS 1944.100.24898 (Newell).

20 Santangelo (2007: pp. 35–36).

21 Cf. Thompson (1961: pp. 371–372, Nos 1165–11772; Pl. 130); Habicht (1976: pp. 135–142); Flament (2007: pp. 147–150). Kroll (1993: pp. 81–82) argues for a suspension of Athenian mints for five years and dates this issue at c. 79. However, even with this chronology, the ideological overtones of the iconography, as discussed below, remain the same (if not even more pronounced). The new civic coinage co-existed with Roman coins that entered circulation after the sack of the *polis* in 86, Papageorgiadou & Kosmidou (2020: pp. 145–146).

22 Habicht (1976: pp. 135–142); Azoulay (2017: pp. 146–148).

Scholars have long attempted to explain the iconographical choices on the coins in an attempt to date them. For example, in her seminal, yet now significantly revised, study of the *New Style* coinage of Athens, Margaret Thompson (1961: pp. 371–372) dated the coins to 118/7, explaining that possibly the iconographic choice relied on a bond between the two mint magistrates, Mentor and Moschion or their ‘mutual devotion to the cause of freedom’.²³ More recently, Vincent Azoulay (2017: pp. 140, 146–148) has interpreted this choice as an instrument of repairing the ‘severely strained diplomacy’ seeking to create or reaffirm links with the Roman leaders of the time. He further saw the iconographic choice as indicative of the Athenian political culture. He supported the idea of an Athenian agency for the coin’s iconography aimed towards internal (Athenian) and external audiences (a gesture to Sulla).²⁴ I propose we view it as a case of anchoring changes in a typically Athenian narrative. Indeed, I believe that we can look further for Athenian agency.

The timing of such iconographical choices is telling, and together with the revised dating, they make the choice even more critical of civic ideology. The Athenians had a long tradition of appropriating political (and historical) developments and could not have missed the opportunity to resort to such practices.²⁵ At first glance, the iconography may allude to the end of the ‘tyrannical’ rule of Aristion, as painted by ancient sources, or even of that of Mithridates.²⁶ In both cases, it portrays clear links to the Athenian past and imaginary as part of an orchestrated civic response to Sulla, combined with the institution of the *Sylleia* (*IG* II² 1039), celebrated only once;²⁷ the dedication of statues to the Roman general (*IG* II² 4103);²⁸ and his initiation to the Eleusinian Mysteries (*Plut. Sull.* 26.1).²⁹ Notably, this was not the first time the Athenians used their *New Style* iconography to associate the *polis* to Roman achievements. For example, in the long continuous series of the *stephanephoroi* some types carry Apollo Delios (as Delos was a gift of the Romans to Athens), Roma or Roma and Nike establishing a tradition and acting as precursors to the iconography of the coin of Mentor and Moschion.³⁰

23 On the debates and dating of the *New Style* coinage of Athens see Lewis (1962); Mørkholm (1984); Mattingly (1990); Kroll (1993; 1997); Oliver (2001); Apostolou (2010); de Callataÿ (2011).

24 Price (1987: p. 95). Contra de Callataÿ (2011: pp. 77–78) who sees Roman presence in the mint. However, de Callataÿ also argues for economic reasons (‘pragmatic monetary affairs’) that led the Athenians and the Romans in using the *stephanephoroi*. However, in his approach, he removes most of the agency from the Athenians and offers it mostly to their rulers (the Romans), a case that may contradict the importance of coinage for civic identity as a manifestation of autonomy and ideology.

25 Kuin (2016: p. 165); Azoulay (2017: p. 148).

26 Cf. *Plut. Mor.* 809E, where Aristion is described along with Nabis and Catiline as enemies of the state and of any citizen: δει γὰρ ἐχθρὸν μηδένα πολίτην νομίζειν, ἂν μὴ τις, οἷος Ἀριστίων ἢ Νάβις ἢ Κατιλίνας νόσημα καὶ ἀπόστημα πόλεως ἐγγένηται τοὺς δ’ ἄλλως ἀπάδοντας. Similarly, Strabo (9.1.20) speaks of tyrants (note the plural) that Mithridates VI put in charge of Athens.

27 According to Raubitschek (1951), the games in honour of Sulla were a renaming of the ancient *Theseia*. Hoff (1997: p. 43); Kleinschmidt (2011); Parigi (2013: p. 448).

28 For a second example, see Geagan (2011: p. 223).

29 Kuin (2017: p. 165); Worthington (2021: p. 213). For the connection between these elements see also Kleinschmidt (2011).

30 Thompson (1961: pp. 226, 359, and 362 respectively).

Arguably, Sulla himself was aware of the potential and possibilities that such images could create to establish a particular political narrative and disseminate it to the public (Athenian, Roman, or other). According to Appian (*B Civ.* 1.7.57), as Sulla was marching his legions against the city of Rome, he made direct references to Marius and Sulpicius as ‘tyrants’. At the same time, he was promoting himself as the ‘liberator’ of Rome.³¹ It might be that Sulla placed copies of the statues of the Athenian tyrannicides in the Capitol for the same reasons of promoting the narrative of the ‘liberator’.³² The fire that partly destroyed the Capitol in 83 provided an excellent opportunity for self-promotion, and it seems highly plausible that the preceding rhetoric of the ‘liberator’ and ‘tyrannicide’ linked with Sulla in Athens inspired Sulla to appropriate and use them in Rome.³³

Other evidence suggest a collective, civic Athenian agency rather than an initiative by the two magistrates or, even, Sulla. In his campaign against Mithridates, Sulla had a mobile mint in operation to cover war expenses. Several Roman issues were minted during the campaign with a Roman-centric iconography that is closely connected to Sulla.³⁴ In the same period, the years 84/3, the Sullan mint produced a series of *aurei* and *denarii* with the head of Venus wearing a diadem. A standing Cupid holding a palm branch facing Venus is on its right, and the inscription L(UCIUS) SULLA complete the obverse. On the reverse, the iconography includes two trophies with a jug and a *lituus* between them, with the inscription IMPER(ATOR) above and ITERU(M) below (Figure 2).³⁵

Sulla cultivated specific links to Aphrodite, similar to those that Pompey would promote some years later. According to Appian (*B Civ.* 1.97), the Senate addressed Sulla as Epaphroditus, he received an oracle that connected him to the goddess, and then dedicated a golden crown and an inscribed double-axe to the Temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias.³⁶ Moreover, after his victory at Chaironeia and Orchomenos in Boiotia, Sulla raised two trophies dedicated to ‘Mars, Victory, and Venus’ (Plut. *Sull.* 19.5). The iconographical choice for the reverse of these coins is telling; Sulla disseminated the message of the success of the Roman arms against the aggressors.

However, the case is that coins of a similar iconography to the *stephanophoric* coinage of Mentor and Moschion appears in the so-called Pseudo-Athenian coins, which emulate the Athenian *stephanephoroi* (Figure 3). The obverse follows exactly the Athenian *stephanephoroi* iconography. Yet, the reverse depicts an owl standing on amphora with A on it, with MAPKOY monogram to the left and TAMIOY to the right, all within wreath. The monograms designate the man responsible for the expenses of the Roman campaign, Marcus [Terentius Varro] Lucullus, brother of Lucius Licinius Lucullus,

31 App. *B Civ.* 1.7.57: ὁ δ’ εἶπε: ἔλευθερώσω αὐτὴν ἀπὸ τῶν τυραννούντων” [trans. (Sulla) said: I will liberate her (Rome) from its tyrants]. On the rhetoric of *libertas* see Tatum (2020).

32 On the eastern slope of the hill, Sulla had set up a statuary group as part of his triumphs in the East, one that could accommodate an image of the tyrannicides. Only the statue of Aristogeiton has survived and was unearthed in excavations of 1937; Azoulay (2017: pp. 141–146).

33 For full discussion, Azoulay (2017: pp. 139–161).

34 Cf. *RRC* 359, 366–368, 375.

35 *RRC* 359/1 and 359/2; Sear 276.

36 For the cult of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias see Brody (2001).



Figure 2: Aureus (10.81g; above) and AR denarius (below) of L. Cornelius Sulla (moving mint; 84/3). Obv. Head of Venus looking right, with eros standing in front of it looking left with palm-tree branch. Inscription L(UCIUS) SULLA below, all within a border of dots. Rev. Two trophies left and right, with lituus and jug between them. Inscription IMPER(ATOR) above and ITERU(M) below, all within a border of dots. **Sources:** Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Monnaies, médailles et antiques, REP-21375; CNG.

Roman Senator and close companion of Sulla.³⁷ Another pseudo-Athenian *stephanephoros* coin bears an owl standing on an amphora, framed by two trophies left and right – the trophies of Sulla’s victories at Chaironeia and Orchomenos – all within wreath.³⁸ One must note, in this case, the absence of the ethnic of the issuing authority.

The absence of genitive plural of the collective Athenian issuing authority that could confirm an Athenian agency for these coins is telling, in contrast to the *stephanophoric* issue of Mentor and Moschion. These are the coins that Sulla minted to fund his campaign using the sacred treasures of Epidauros, Olympia, and Delphoi.³⁹ Naturally, the well-established style and status of the Athenian tetradrachms are the reasons behind these issues, but clearly, this is a case of a different agency with the Roman magistrate replacing the Athenians.

37 Cf. the dedications by the Athenian people and the Areopagos *IG II²* 4104, 4105.

38 Camp *et al.* (1992).

39 Plut. *Sull.* 3–4; Diod. 38–39.5; Paus. 9.7.5–6. Ruggeri (2006).



Figure 3: AR Pseudo-Athenian tetradrachm minted under L. Cornelius Sulla (moving mint; 84/3). Obv. Helmeted head of Athena to the right within border of dots. Rev. Owl standing on amphora with an inscribed A on it, with MAPKOY monogram to the left and TAMIOY to the right, all within wreath. **Source:** Thompson 1293 & 1313.

Given the different uses, timeframe, and audiences, I think it is more plausible to assume that the agency behind the iconographical choice for the *stephanophoric* issue with the Harmodios and Aristogeiton rests on Athenian agents. The Athenians were capable of following an exceedingly long tradition of political appropriation of historical events, another profound instance of anchoring if I may: they associated the sack of Athens with the expulsion of the tyrant(s) Aristion and/or Mithridates. However, in contrast to previous uses of the tyrannicides back in 307 (Diod. 20.46.2)⁴⁰ there is no explicit return to democracy. Thus, one ought to enquire further on the reasons.

The events of 307/6, the liberation of Athens by the Antigonids, is, I believe, the closest comparable example to the sack of Athens by Sulla. For it was too a period of political instability, when the Athenians were under the control of the forces of Kassandros and his *epimeletes*, with their autonomy and freedom under question. In Diodoros' account (20.46), the Antigonid Saviours were integrated into the political and religious practices and calendar of the Athenians with the erection of the altar to the *Soteres* (Saviours) and annual games and sacrifices in their name.⁴¹ Similarly, Demetrios was offered the Parthenon as a residence and, after an extraordinary re-arrangement of the religious calendar, was initiated to the Eleusinian Mysteries. Politics and religion seem to be tightly knit together when the latter can serve civic objectives. Therefore, we should approach the divine honours bestowed upon Antigonos and Demetrios as intending to serve the public good. Indeed, the level of integration of the Saviours into Athenian traditions was

40 Mikalson (1998: p. 79).

41 Cf. Plut. *Demetr.* 10.2.

multi-level and thus unusual. This may be another indication that the Athenians –the elite– understood the need to navigate through precarious times with as much conformity as possible (Pagkalos 2018: pp. 89–90). To return to the first century, it seems that at the time of Sulla, Athenian political and religious affairs were no less intertwined than in earlier periods, and offered, once again, the opportunity to cater for the needs of the *polis*' survival.

Turning to the Stone: Some Epigraphic Evidence on Political Anchoring

As we have seen earlier, something similar was attempted for Sulla, although not at all so majestic. First, references preserved in the epigraphic record attest to the *Sylleia*, games held in honour of Sulla, in all probability inaugurated during the second visit of the consul at Athens in 84/3. An inscribed base that bears a cutting in the top for a torch belongs to an ephobic dedication to Hermes for a victory at the *lampas* (torch) race (*IG* II³ 4, 375):⁴²

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | [Ζη]νίων Ζηνίωνος [Μαραθώνιος]
[Σ]υλλεία λαμπάδ[α νικήσας]
[Ε]ρμῆι, vac. παιδοτρ[ιβούντος]
[Φ]ιλοκλέους Κολ[ωνῆθεν] |
| 5 | [ύ]π[ο]παιδοτριβού[ντος – –]
[.]ους Ἀλεξανδρέ[ως]. |
| 1 | [Ze]nion, the son of Zenion [of Marathon]
[having been victorious] in the torch race at the [S]ylleia
(dedicated this) to Hermes when <i>paidotribes</i> (trainer) was
[F]ilokles [from] Kolonai |
| 5 | and when [<i>hyp</i>]opaidotribes (deputy trainer) was ...
... of Alexandria. |

However, the games were short-lived and, in all probability, did not outlive Sulla. According to Antony Raubitschek (1951: pp. 49–57), the games were not a new addition but a refashioning of the *Theseia*, a festival established in the fifth century.⁴³ During the same visit, Sulla was initiated in the Eleusinian Mysteries (Plut. *Sull.* 26)⁴⁴ and honoured with

42 Geagan (2011: pp. 74–75). Cf. A decree honouring the *ephebes* (79/8; *IG* II² 1039, l. 58): ἔθυσαν δὲ καὶ τὰ Συλλεῖ[α].

43 Cf. Kleinschmidt (2011); Henderson (2020: pp. 287–288).

44 Kuin (2017: p. 159). The initiation to the mysteries seems to belong to the range of honours the Athenians offer to their 'benefactors', where clearly this is a political tool that elevated the foreigner and made Athenian narratives prevalent through the framing of any external candidate to a very Athenian ritual. Later, Pompey was initiated (62 BCE) cf. Kroll (1993: pp. 99–100); Hoff (2005: p. 332) and possibly Marcus Antonius (Plut. *Ant.* 23.2).

a statue on account of his virtue (ἀρετῆς) and his goodwill (εὐνοίας).⁴⁵ The formula, however, is typical in dedications. Between the honorific statue and the short-lived festival, it seems that the Athenians were reluctant to bestow extraordinary honours upon someone who nearly destroyed their *polis*.⁴⁶ Interestingly, around the same time, a Hellenistic statue at the Amphiareion of Oropos was rededicated to Sulla, part of a trend of similar acts for other Roman officials.⁴⁷ It may be that these honours were conferred upon Sulla due to the restoration of Athenian control over the islands of Imbros, Lemnos, Skyros, and Delos.⁴⁸ However, compared to the statues and honours for the Antigonids back at the end of the fourth century, we see evident discrepancies in the Athenians' response.

The reason should be sought to the actual predicament of the Athenians – the *polis* laid in ruins, many of its buildings destroyed, and many of its citizens slaughtered by the Roman legions.⁴⁹ Furthermore, if indeed the rule of Aristion was the rule of a tyrant, thus raising questions about democracy and the role of Mithridates, then with Sulla, we do not see any political change for the better. Even though scholars agree that Sulla did not impose a 'new' constitution, certain restrictions are visible. For example, the absence of the traditional formula 'the Council and the People decreed' (ἔδοξεν τῆι βουλῆι καὶ τῶι δήμῳ) from Athenian decrees for more than thirty years demonstrates a firm turn towards a more restrictive, less democratic regime.⁵⁰

As the epigraphic evidence attests, it was probably in 49/8, after Caesar's victory over Pompey, that the Athenians shed some of the restrictions. Caesar demonstrated leniency towards the Athenians, although they had sided with Pompey. Caesar's famous retort: 'how often [...] the glory of the Athenian ancestors will save Athens' (Appian, *B Civ* 2.88) echoes a similar discussion between the Athenian ambassadors and the Romans that took place before the destruction of the *polis* by Sulla.⁵¹ For his stance and earlier benefactions towards the city, Caesar was honoured as *Soter* and *Euergetes* with two statues in the Athenian Agora.⁵²

45 *IG* II² 4103; *SEG* 24:214 (c. 83): [ὁ δήμος] | [Λεύκιον Κορν]ήλιον | [Λευκίου υἱὸν] Σύλλαν | ἀρε[τῆς ἕνεκα κ] αὶ εὐνοίας | τῆς εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἀ]νέθηκεν. At least one more statue was dedicated to the Roman general, as another inscribed statue base from the Athenian *Agora* demonstrates, see Geagan (2011: p. 223).

46 Also, Hoff (1997: p. 43). See also Eckert (2016: pp. 94–95), who discusses the Athenian response in connection to the Pythian oracle they received (Paus. 1.20.7) that would have brought forth the memory of the oracle Theseus received about the *polis* (Plut. *Thes.* 24.5).

47 Petrakos (1968: pp. 154–170); Palagia (1997: p. 82). Cf. *I.Oropos* 308 (= *IG* VII 413; *Syll.*³ 747).

48 Hoff (1997: p. 43); Worthington (2021: pp. 212–213).

49 Hoff (1997: pp. 40–41); Ruggeri (2006); Mango (2010: pp. 117–125); Kuin (2018); Parigi (2019); Worthington (2021: 210–213).

50 App. *Mithr.* 6.38–39 reports that Sulla forgave (the Athenians) and imposed laws that were very close to those that have been previously determined for them by the Romans. See Geagan (1964); Kuin (2017); Antela-Bernárdez (2019); Worthington (2021: pp. 213–215). The first surviving decree with the formula is dated in 49/8 (*IG* II² 1047; cf. *IG* II² 1046).

51 App. *B Civ.* 2.88: καὶ Ἀθηναῖοις αἰτήσασι συγγνώμην ἐπεδίδου καὶ ἐπέειπε: 'ποσάκις ὑμᾶς ὑπὸ σφῶν αὐτῶν ἀπολλυμένους ἢ δόξα τῶν προγόνων περισώσει. Cf. note 7, above.

52 *SEG* 14:121; Geagan (2011, H249–251); Heijnen (2018: p. 86); Worthington (2021: pp. 228–229).

To return to the iconography of Mentor and Moschion's issue, Sulla and his actions against the *polis* (from actual or looming destruction to changes in the polity) make the appearance of the tyrannicides discussed previously even more intriguing. The Athenians may have chosen this iconographical theme despite, or better, due to all their hardships. Throughout the Hellenistic period, the Athenians had experienced similar changes of fate, although they may never have come so close to actual destruction. However, they would always return to a 'democracy', thus anchoring all changes in a very central, Athenian narrative. It may be that a pro-Roman party could have promoted Sulla as a tyrant-slayer, embedding the events around the siege of the *polis* in the narrative of liberation.⁵³ Nevertheless, it may also be that this anchoring was a subtle, yet clear to the internal audience, comment against Sulla and the Romans. Of course, Sulla was not a boor. He could have understood the comment against the conquering Roman forces and himself. However, as seen in the evidence of his campaign in Southern Greece, he was certainly aware of the financial and political capital of coinage, as he operated a moving mint and circulated *denarii* and copies of local coinage (as in the case of the *pseudo-Athenian stephanephoroï*).⁵⁴ Then, it may be that he allowed the coins to circulate despite their ambiguous message. At the very least, he used the message for his own agenda back in Rome, while the Athenians could once again wage war in *litteris verbisque*, echoing Livy's perspective.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed some mechanisms of anchoring innovations, that is the process of reformulating developments and situating them within a familiar language. What I hope is apparent here is that the Athenians possessed an established tradition they could use depending on circumstances. From the tradition and their status as a centre of culture, the Athenians would not resort to extravagant honours since the ambient situation could not change, and their (relative) autonomy or freedom was not actively at stake. This negotiation mode of power and internal control of the narrative may not have always been clear to the outsiders. However, the Athenians reimplemented many aspects every time a possibility for tangible benefits or the opportunity to become something more than a subjugated *polis* presented themselves. They repeated part of these honours and anchoring practices with all key Roman figures of the last period of the Republic: Pompey, Caesar, Brutus, Marcus Antonius, and, of course, Augustus.⁵⁵ This practice allowed for the creation of a common space for negotiation, part of the Athenian response instrumentalised throughout the Hellenistic period. The recipe was remarkably successful for the *polis* even if the period of Sulla was a dark moment; after all, it was the only precarious circumstance. Typically, the Athenians survived every decision

53 Kuin (2017: p. 165).

54 Zoumbaki (2018: pp. 362–3367); Papageorgiadou & Kosmidou (2020: p. 160).

55 Heijnen (2018).

to side with the wrong side unscathed, situating events into a familiar political discourse while inviting external favours or leniency.⁵⁶ In response, every time the Athenians were treated with respect, they would answer in kind, further appropriating changes in their political discourse while bestowing honours to foreigners and employing political symbolism.

The question that remains is if this was their only choice. The short answer is no, it was not, as the epigraphic evidence attests. There, the political language, the core element of political culture, offers a much more nuanced image, but this is a topic for another, more extended paper.

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56 For a similar reading, see also Mango (2010: p. 124); Eckert (2016: p. 95).

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