Odysseus Sertorius

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In 1992, Professor Luis García Moreno published a brilliant paper, in which he pointed out the relationship between paradoxography and Plutarch's *Life of Sertorius*. Directly or indirectly, we can trace the influence of these ideas in later studies, such as that of Jean-Mallier Pailler (2000), to point out the one that, in my opinion, deserves more attention. In previous studies, I have already offered some reflections on the character of Sertorius, but I would like to take up here, from the framework indicated, certain elements that strike me in Plutarch's biography. In any case, it is worth warning whoever reads these lines that I will start here from a recurrent perception and idea –to which I have devoted some research (Antela-Bernárdez 2011, 2014a)–, concerning the fictions that are transmitted in the historical narratives of our sources, and that, although they have sometimes been considered as truthful, they deserve another kind of approach.

Certainly, much of what the ancients recorded in their works of history and biographies or collections of facts, *exempla*, etc., seems to be more related to fiction than to reality. It is possible, for example, that this might have been intentional, like when Lycurgus of Butades recalled the night of the battle of Chaeronea by evoking the cold that gripped the bodies of those who took the responsibility for manning the defences of Athens, something that is hard to believe considering that the battle took place in August and that the temperature in Attica in that period of the year is usually high (Antela-Bernárdez 2019). But it is more likely that many of these references are, at the bottom, the product of a way of conceiving reality, history and the world, typical of Antiquity or perhaps, more specifically, of Greek culture. Certain data considered to be historical are merely symbolic or narrative-cultural resources, which, in the hermeneutic effort to understand our sources, we must critically observe with care, perspective and detail.

As far as the case of Sertorius is concerned, as his experiences are recounted in the biography dedicated to him by Plutarch, there are certainly many elements that seem to transcend the historical and become more fictional. The aforementioned works by García Moreno and Pailler are excellent proofs of how to analyse many of these facts. I would now like to draw

attention to some aspects which, as far as I know, have not been dealt with yet, but which complement the view of the aforementioned works.

Theodor Mommsen (1976 VII: 54) considered Sertorius to be the greatest character to emerge in the *History of Rome*. Mommsen's coincidence with Theopompus' statement about Philip of Macedon, who claimed that Europe had never produced a man like the Macedonian king (*FGrH* 115 T 19, F 27 *apud* Plb. VIII. 11; cf. D.S. XVI. 95.1), is quite surprising. In this respect, it is necessary to recall that both Philip and Sertorius were one-eyed. From here, it is worth dwelling on the prologue to the *Life of Sertorius*, in which Plutarch expounds his famous maxim that Rome's worst enemies were, in fact, one-eyed men. This danger of one-eyed men for Rome brings us to several places that must have been commonplace in the minds of the text's recipients in Antiquity. Perhaps the most obvious case in relation to Sertorius is that of Horatius Cocles.

Cocles shows several similarities with Sertorius that are surely not coincidental. As well as being one-eyed, Cocles was the protagonist of a memorable episode in the history of Rome. In 508 BC, while defending Sulpicius Bridge alone against Etruscan troops, he heroically resisted them, but when besieged by his enemies he had to save his life by throwing himself into the Tiber:

> "Then Cocles cried, "O Father Tiberinus, I solemnly invoke thee; receive these arms and this soldier with propitious stream!" So praying, all armed as he was, he leaped down into the river, and under a shower of missiles swam across unhurt to his fellows, having given a proof of valour which was destined to obtain more fame than credence with posterity. The state was grateful for so brave a deed: a statue of Cocles was set up in the comitium, and he was given as much land as he could plough around in one day." (Liv. II. 11-12; translated by Foster 1919)

As we can see, the story of Cocles was well known to the Romans, and the physical presence of his memory, by means of a statue, configured his exemplum within the urban space of the city. Beyond certain interesting symbolisms such as the religious value of bridges in Antiquity – and in Roman culture in particular–, it is worth pointing out the parallels with an episode in the life of Sertorius:

> "To begin with, when the Cimbri and Teutones invaded Gaul, he served under Caepio, and after the Romans had been defeated and

> put to flight, though he had lost his horse and had been wounded in the body, he made his way across the Rhone, swimming, shield and breastplate and all, against a strongly adverse current; so sturdy was his body and so inured to hardships by training." (Plu. *Sert.* 3.1; all translations by Perrin 1919)

Undoubtedly, there is an *emulatio* here, but we do not know if it was conscious. We cannot even say whether the event is authentic or it is the result of the assimilation of one one-eyed man (Sertorius) with another (Cocles). However, this assimilation, which seems to have its origin in the lack of an eye, may lead us to other reflections. In fact, one-eyed men were often assimilated in antiquity to Cyclopes. And thus to the *Odyssey*[1].

Certainly, Sertorius had many elements in common with the hero Odysseus. The most obvious are precisely those that connect Sertorius with his travels, his wandering search for a place to rest and settle. But the comparison between the two characters certainly goes beyond that. First of all, we must remember Odysseus' role as a spy of the Achaeans, able to sneak in among the enemies[2]:

> "Marring his own body with cruel blows, and flinging a wretched garment about his shoulders, in the fashion of a slave he entered the broad-wayed city of the foe, and he hid himself under the likeness of another, a beggar, he who was in no wise such an one at the ships of the Achaeans. In this likeness he entered the city of the Trojans, and all of them were but as babes..." (Hom. *Od*. IV. 244-250; translation by Murray 1919).

The passage has much in common with another starred by Sertorius:

> "In the next place, when the same enemies were coming up with many myriads of men and dreadful threats, so that for a Roman even to hold his post at such a time and obey his general was a great matter, while Marius was in command, Sertorius undertook to spy out the enemy. So, putting on a Celtic dress and acquiring the commonest expressions of that language for such conversation as might be necessary, he mingled with the Barbarians; and after seeing or hearing what was of importance, he came back to Marius. At the

[1] We can even point out that Sertorius' peer in Plutarch's *Lives*, Eumenes, also faced a Cyclops, a one-eyed man: Antigonus Monophthalmus. I owe this idea to the kind advice of Antonio Ignacio Molina Marín.

[2] The topic has been reviewed by Pórtulas 2014.

> time, then, he received a prize for valour; and since, during the rest of the campaign, he performed many deeds which showed both judgement and daring, he was advanced by his general to positions of honour and trust" (Plu. *Sert.* 3.2-3).

This is not the only example of Sertorius' ability to infiltrate himself behind enemy lines:

> "Then, when the slaughter was ended, he ordered all his soldiers to lay aside their own armour and clothing, to array themselves in those of the Barbarians, and then to follow him to the city from which the men came who had fallen upon them in the night. Having thus deceived the Barbarians by means of the armour which they saw, he found the gate of the city open, and caught a multitude of men who supposed they were coming forth to meet a successful party of friends and fellow citizens. Therefore most of the inhabitants were slaughtered by the Romans at the gate; the rest surrendered and were sold into slavery." (Plu. *Sert.* 3.8-10)

It is hard not to see, in this last episode, concomitances between the action of Sertorius and the capture of Troy by the Achaeans through the cunning wit of Odysseus. In fact, even the order of the narrative seems to invite us to do so, since in Plutarch's work this story comes just after the episode of the already mentioned emulation of Cocles. In this sense, the celebrated cunning of Odysseus has, in fact, a character of its own in Sertorius. It does not stand for no reason that Sertorius is remembered, especially by historiography, as a model of a general skilled in trickery and deception, a specialist in guerrilla warfare (Cadiou 2004)[3]. Episodes demonstrating his skill in this field are frequent and once again underline the links with Odysseus' *métis*. The relationship between the two may be underlined not only by Sertorius' character as a traveller, but also by that physical feature of the sole eye, and hence of the Cyclopes, which would connect the Roman general with the tradition of the Homeric poem.

There are, then, certain elements in the *Life of Sertorius* that might make us doubt the authenticity of the account. Therefore, we can ask ourselves to what extent Sertorius, as a character in the historical account, really lived these events as such, or whether, on the contrary, the facts conform to a series of clichés that concerned popular knowledge and helped the latter to

[3] For some historiographical considerations on the perception of modern historians in relation to guerrilla warfare, see Antela-Bernárdez 2014b.

frame the character and connect him with others, to understand him better from here. I suppose the question is unanswerable.

However, one last aspect of Plutarch's biography seems to be worth mentioning in this study. The story of Sertorius and his white deer is well known (Plu. *Sert.* 11.3-8, 20.1-5; App. *BC.* I. 110; cf. Konrad 1994: 123-124). The issue of this animal, which has attracted no attention from the researchers, as far as I know, deserves caution. First of all, we know that the little white hind was quickly associated with Artemis by Sertorius (Plu. *Sert.* 11.7). Sertorius would derive interesting propaganda benefits from this, by making his Hispanic-Lusitanian followers believe that the goddess was protecting and favouring his enterprise (cf. Konrad 1994: 125).

We can try to understand the figure of this animal in many ways[4]. Firstly, we know that the stag is a fundamental animal in the hunting activity of the Homeric heroes[5], although it should also be noted that, in Homer, only Odysseus is dressed with a deer skin, thanks to Athena (Hom. *Od.* XIII. 434-437; Levaniouk 2011). In this aspect, in fact, he coincides with Actaeon himself (Paus. IX. 2.3). On the other hand, the hind could refer to multiple aspects: Professor Ñaco del Hoyo suggested to me in an informal conversation some years ago, that this animal might be related to the hinds on the coins of Mithridates VI Eupator (De Callatäy 1997). Bearing in mind the links between Mithridates and Sertorius, also mentioned by Plutarch, this could be one reasonable option. Another, also related to these coinages, would be that the hind in question was related to Iphigenia, converted by Artemis into a sacred hind, which would again bring us back to the Homeric sphere. If we consider that Iphigenia's journey took place in regions that earlier geography had associated with Iberia, perhaps we could connect the two ideas. All this, however, seems somewhat excessive and would deserve more attention than the one I can devote here.

Likewise, the use of this deception is in itself a possible crime of *hýbris*, an aggression against the goddess and the respect she deserved. This is even pointed out by Plutarch (*Sert.* 12.1) himself: "They believed that they were led, not by the mortal wisdom of a foreigner, but by a god". The very idea

[4] There is evidence on the importance of the deer in Celtic cults and rituals; see Ladenbauer-Orel 1965; Pauli 1983. I owe these references to the kind advice of Nikolaus Boroffka.

[5] They are also present in the Macedonian Classical world, as evidenced by some famous paintings from Pella.

that Sertorius had encouraged or nourished beliefs of a divine nature about himself in a complex situation, as far as we know from Antiquity, must have aroused suspicion among the Romans, fearful of the divine punishment they might suffer for this. Indeed, this seems to be the meaning of the idea with which Perpena begins the speech he addresses to Sertorius' men to lead them to sedition and conspiracy: "What evil genius, pray, has seized us and is hurrying us from bad to worse?" (Plu. *Sert.* 25.3). The same idea, albeit in a veiled form, is implicit in the story of the loss and recovery of the hind, which Sertorius skillfully orchestrates to make it seem that this is a new design of the divinity, and thereby also to reaffirm his image as a pious man beloved by the gods, when in fact it was a ruse of his own (Plu. *Sert.* 20).

We know that Sertorius was killed by his own men at a banquet (Plu. *Sert.* 26.6-11; cf. Konrad 1994: 211-214)[6]. It is perhaps a little audacious to think here that his death could be related to that of Actaeon, turned into a stag by Artemis and torn to pieces by his own dogs[7]. However, Plutarch himself invites us in a certain way to do so from the very prologue of his *Life of Sertorius* (1.4), where Actaeon is mentioned in a way that perhaps seems accidental. In any case, it is possible that the element of hunting has a certain weight here, taking into account the value that this activity has both in the myth of Actaeon and in the scene of the *Odyssey* where the hero appears dressed with the skin of a deer. The same is true of the episode of Pentheus' death, butchered by a trusted person, in the *Bacchae* (337-342).

Perhaps, there could be some link between Sertorius' sacred hind and the Dionysian cycle[8]. Plutarch mentions sacred deer elsewhere (*Ages.* 6.8), again in a Boeotian context. The relationship of Actaeon to Semele also is related to this, as does the customary dress of the bacchants, the *nebris*

[6] The episode has many elements in common with the banquet in which Alexander murdered Cleitus. On the links between this episode in Alexander's life and the Homeric world, see Cohen 1995; *contra* Carlier 2000.

[7] It is important to note that, in the earliest extant versions of the myth of Actaeon, the reason for this punishment does not seem to have to do with Artemis directly, but with Actaeon's desire to marry Semele; see Levaniouk 2011. In fact, the hunting competition between Actaeon and Artemis appears in Euripides' *Bacchae*, where another character, Pentheus, is cut up by his close associates.

[8] We must take into account the Thracian origin, in some traditions, of Dionysus. There are traditions of the depiction of deer in a Thracian context (Kull 2000) and also the connections between certain Thracian and Iberian traditions; see Kull 2002; Spânu *et al*. 2018: esp. 17 (map 3), 27 (map 5). I owe these references to the kind advice of Nikolaus Boroffka.

(Levaniouk 2011). This suggests to me that the strong presence of the Dionysian and the Boeotian mythical cycle is actually related to Plutarch's Boeotian origin. On the other hand, although Pailler (2000) pointed out the elements of the heroic model of Heracles in the *Life of Sertorius*, as well as more slightly than with those that could refer to the *Odyssey*, the fact is that we can clearly add to these two aspects those of Dionysus and the Theban cycle.

Returning to the strong presence of the hunting metaphor in Actaeon and in the episode of the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus dresses in deerskin, it is worth asking to what extent the conflict in Hispania in which Sertorius was the protagonist would also have been posed in these terms by Plutarch. Indeed, during his fight with Metellus, Plutarch (*Sert.* 13.1-3) points to Sertorius as the hunter, albeit in a certain reversed role:

> "Metellus was now getting on in years, and was somewhat inclined also, by this time, to an easy and luxurious mode of life after his many and great contests; whereas his opponent, Sertorius, was full of mature vigour, and had a body which was wonderfully constituted for strength, speed, and plain living. For in excessive drinking he would not indulge even in his hours of ease, and he was wont to endure great toils, long marches, and continuous wakefulness, content within meagre and indifferent food; moreover, since he was always wandering about or hunting when he had leisure for it, he obtained an acquaintance with every way of escape for a fugitive, or of surrounding an enemy under pursuit, in places both accessible and inaccessible. The result was, therefore, that Metellus, by being kept from fighting, suffered all the harm which visits men who are defeated; while Sertorius, by flying, had the advantages of men who pursue. For in excessive drinking he would not indulge even in his hours of ease, and he was wont to endure great toils, long marches, and continuous wakefulness, content within meagre and indifferent food; moreover, since he was always wandering about or hunting when he had leisure for it, he obtained an acquaintance with every way of escape for a fugitive, or of surrounding an enemy under pursuit, in places both accessible and inaccessible. The result was, therefore, that Metellus, by being kept from fighting, suffered all the harm which visits men who are defeated; while Sertorius, by flying, had the advantages of men who pursue".

Note the value in this supremacy of Sertorius over Metellus based on the former's experience as a hunter. New Actaeon, Sertorius, a great hunter, would have been finally killed by his own men, in the same way as Anctaeon is killed by his dogs. Plutarch's narrative elaboration and the religious crime committed against Artemis would make the public presuppose the end that the story had in store for him.

To conclude, after this kind of play with the ideas, the models and the sources, I wonder if what we know about Sertorius, which came mainly from Plutarch, can really be regarded as historical or just a kind of game in fictions concerning myth, parallels and interpretative boxes the ancient authors used to manage in order to set into motion the kind of comprehensive narrative they associated with the literary genre they called History. Our knowledge, thus, about what happened and what Sertorius' adventures meant for the people of the age he lived, however, just makes sense if we take into account very seriously this type of narratives and the usual, unclear and pretty links between facts and fiction.

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