

Fortune and Luck:
Some Roman Considerations

by R.L. Porter

From earliest times the Romans worshipped an Italian goddess they called *Fortuna* or *Fors* or *Fors Fortuna*. Originally she appears to have been a fertility goddess (from the verb *ferre*, to bring, comes the name *Fortuna*) for crops, animals and humans. The Latin adjective for lucky is *felix*. At weddings, for instance, the Romans shouted out their "felicitations" by crying out *Feliciter*—may it turn out happily, i.e., with increase. This deity was described as the *Jovis filia primigenia* (the eldest-born daughter of Jupiter). As time went on this goddess began to be identified with the Greek allegorical goddess *Tyche* (Luck or Chance). *Tyche*, like *Fortuna*, could be looked upon in two different ways, as one's lot (neutral or bad or good) or as positive success. There is another dichotomy here as well for Fortune can be seen as something conferred by the gods or a god or Providence generally, or simply as blind luck or happenstance.

As regards the use of *felix* (lucky) the Romans could describe a place as such. A good example would be the territory called *Arabia Felix*. The Romans had three Arabias. One was called *Deserta* and coincides with the central wasteland of Saudi Arabia, another was called *Petraea* after the dominant city of southern Jordan named Petra, and finally there was the coastal district of the Arabian peninsula facing the Red Sea called *Felix* (happy or prosperous) from its production of myrrh, frankincense and other treasures.

The first Roman to rather arrogantly appropriate this term as part of his personal name was Lucius Cornelius Sulla *Felix*. Romans of course had been free to add colourful *cognomina* (adjuncts) to their names for centuries but taking a name such as Lucky would seem to many prudent folk to be tempting fate.

Sulla's claim to luck was based on a number of factors ranging from blind superstition to clever image building (P.R. work). We read in Sallust's *Jugurtha* 95.4 that Sulla was *felicissimus omnium*, the luckiest man of all. A Chaldaean astrologer had promised a glowing future to a young Sulla whose future at the time appeared dim—few successful fortune tellers promise their clients misery, poverty and doom you may have noticed.

But then the wonders began to roll in for Sulla:

1. His mother-in-law died and left him some money.
2. A prostitute girlfriend did the same—was Sulla assisting his "Fortune"?
3. As quaestor for Marius in 106 BC he captured single-handedly Jugurtha, the Numidian rebel prince who had kept Rome off balance for years.
4. In 88 he became consul against all odds and went east to fight a successful war there.
5. By 82 he seized Rome with his army and held it under his control as Dictator for four years.

Clearly Sulla saw great advantages in taking his unique cognomen. On one level he was suggesting to all Romans that a concerned Providence had brought him forward as destiny's righteous champion to save the entire state. On another level he was suggesting to his soldiers and clients that they should stick with him since he was a charmed individual who would always win. Whatever the intention, Sulla's luck, like all luck, ran out in 78 when he died of a particularly unpleasant disease and his life's work began to unravel like sodden tissue in a storm drain. Fortune was ever fickle.