

Re-staging the Lusitanian War in Silius' *Punica*

Silius Italicus ends his seventeen-book epic on the Second Punic War with a celebratory vision of a subdued Spain. Scipio Africanus, the hero of the poem's latter books, is cast as the pacifier of its lands (*terrae pacator Hiberæ*, 16.245) and subjugator of its peoples (*domitis Pyrenes gentibus*, 16.246). As the warlike tribes of Iberia flock to the general, they are transformed into willing provincial subjects. This description accords well with the state of the empire at the time of the *Punica*'s composition (Mayorgas Rodríguez 2017). Securing the loyalty of the peninsula was of particular interest to Vespasian, who granted Latin rights to *universa Hispania* after the civil wars (Plin. *HN* 3.30). The peaceful provinces of the late first century CE, however, had little in common with those created at the end of the Second Punic War. Although Scipio proclaims their pacification, they spent much of the next century in revolt against Roman rule (Richardson 2000). The most significant of these rebellions took place in Lusitania between 155 and 139 BCE. Remembered as a low point in the story of Roman imperialism (Clark 2014; Bane 1976), the Lusitanian War offers an implicit challenge to the idealized empire of the *Punica*. How Silius responds to it is the subject of my paper.

Rather than avoiding the Lusitanian War, Silius incorporates it into his narrative through the use of historically weighted names. This practice is not specific to events in Spain; Silius' fondness for naming his characters after famous Romans is well-established (McGuire 1995). Less often noticed, however, is that he also names characters after Rome's enemies. In the catalogue of Hannibal's troops in Book 3, he introduces the leader of the Gallicians and Lusitanians as follows: *hos Viriatus agit ... nomen Romanis factum mox nobile damnis* ("Leading these men was Viriathus, whose name would soon be made famous by Roman

defeats,” 3.354-6). Although the character is invented, his name is that of the general who spearheaded the Lusitanian resistance to Rome for more than a decade (Pérez Vilatela 2000). An oft-cited example of the “noble bandit,” Viriathus was famous well into the imperial era. By figuratively including him in Hannibal’s army, Silius draws a parallel between the Second Punic War and the Lusitanian War. Only at Cannae, however, are its stakes revealed.

When the fictional Viriathus re-appears at the Battle of Cannae, he kills a Roman commander in front of Lucius Paulus, the hero of the epic’s middle books: *cum Viriatus agens telis, regnator Hiberæ/ magnanimus terræ, iuxta atque ante ora furentis/ obtruncat Pauli fessum certaminis hostem* (“Viriathus, the high-spirited ruler of an Iberian land, hurried with his spear and slaughtered an enemy fatigued from battle nearby and before the eyes of the enraged Paulus,” 10.219-21). Silius dramatically delays the identification of the dead Roman, who is revealed to be Gn. Servilius Geminus. He happens to have the same family name as Q. Servilius Caepio, the consul who ordered the assassination of the historical Viriathus in 139 BCE. Caepio was widely condemned for ending the Lusitanian War in such a treacherous fashion (Val. Max. 9.6.4; Vell. 2.90.3). Silius’ Servilius corrects the problematic conduct of his descendant by choosing a glorious death over a cowardly life. Viriathus, in turn, gets to exact symbolic revenge on the man responsible for his demise (Littlewood 2017). Through the battlefield encounter of Servilius and Viriathus, Silius constructs an alternative history of the Lusitanian War.

The triumph of Viriathus proves to be short-lived. He is soon killed by Lucius Aemilius Paulus, who secures the battlefield defeat that later eluded the Romans in Spain: *inuadit laeuaeque fodit uitalia mammae* (“He attacked [Viriathus] and stabbed his heart,” 10.231). Through his valorous conduct, Paulus shows readers how the Lusitanian War should have been won. Victory, the poet ultimately suggests, is never worth sacrificing *fides* or *virtus*. Only

through the expression of these virtues can the rebellious tribes of Iberia become the willing provincial subjects depicted at the poem's end. In just thirteen lines, Silius integrates a problematic episode of Roman history into an idealized model of imperial conquest. Provincial rebellions under Flavian rule hint at the contemporary relevance of his message.

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