

The Historians' Agenda for Pirates: Describing the Balearic Campaign

A short campaign in 123 BC brought the Balearic Islands, off the coast of Spain, under Roman control. Once a Carthaginian outpost and for a long time a recruiting ground for skilled slingers, the Balearics had otherwise been ignored since the Second Punic War. The main accounts of this campaign are those of Florus and Strabo, though Florus was likely influenced by Livy and Strabo by Posidonios. My paper takes these different accounts, and uses them to highlight the different motivations these writers had and how our sources sought to write history to prove or reflect their academic and moral theories. In keeping with their motivations, Strabo sought to explain this war in a way that made sense to his ethnographic and geographic theories, while Florus sought to show how Rome stood as a great civilizer by building cities where there were none and eradicating piracy regardless of whether there was any piracy to eradicate. In particular, it is interesting how the nature of pirates changes to suit the historians.

As Thucydides might have said, the causes of the campaign are uncertain, but the pretext was clear. The inhabitants of the islands were either pirates themselves or were sheltering and trading with Ligurian pirates, and (Q. Caecilius) Metellus, the governor of nearer Spain, then invaded the islands. There was little resistance, and Metellus, now 'Balearicus' founded two colonies, settling them with three thousand veterans gathered from Nearer Spain.

Strabo doubts the truth of this, and tells us that foreigners were jealous of the richness of their lands, and we know Metellus had both a force of soldiers at hand desirous of plunder and a family reputation to uphold. This Metellus might even be guilty of the same sort of triumph-hunting Appian would accuse his cousin, Metellus Delmaticus, of pursuing in his campaign of 119. According to Morgan (1969), any pirates Metellus sought were likely not the native Balears, but Ligurians and Sardinians made homeless by recent campaigns in their homelands.

Moreover, the Massiliotes may have started the accusations of piracy, and, indeed, may well have been who Strabo (and Posidonius) had in mind when saying that ‘their lands had been lusted after for many years’. For Morgan, these factors point to Strabo’s account as being truer and more nuanced than that of Florus.

I will not attempt to verify Morgan’s account, but rather, I would like to focus instead on our sources’ biases, which led to differing accounts. Strabo clearly doubts that the Baleares were pirates, but is at pains elsewhere to emphasize that pirates come from impoverished locales and also that the Balearics were fertile lands. Thus, the Baleares, if pirates, would prove to be an unpleasant counterexample to Strabo’s theory. Strabo suggests instead that avarice led Metellus to fabricate charges against the Baleares. Florus insists that they were pirates, and savage and cityless as well. This is a surprising claim, as the Phoenicians had established a colony at Ibiza around five hundred years earlier. Yet Florus regularly demonizes Rome’s enemies, particularly the Gauls, to show the benefit of Roman might and Roman rule. Overall, his account is entirely in keeping with his imperialist agenda.

Interestingly, Florus does admit to the same pretext and cause as Strabo, however, when it comes to the 69-67 campaign in Crete by the nephew of Balearicus, Creticus. (1.42)

...bellum...sola vincendi nobilem insulam cupiditas fecit. If he was willing to attribute one island invasion to avarice, why not another? So Florus implies that the Cretans did not deserve their invasion, but the Baleares did. There is another key difference for the campaigns: the Balearics are ‘unsettled’ while Crete possessed famed cities like Knossus and Kydonia. The ‘cityless’ description of the Balearics has been overlooked, but is a feature stressed by Florus. For Florus, the Romans’ introduction of the city to these islands is a great benefit that contrasts sharply with the Roman takeover of settled (and civilized) Crete.

This campaign serves as an excellent example of how history could serve an alternate agenda. It is hardly surprising that different authors had different motivations, but understanding those motivations is quite useful. In particular, these historians had different conceptions of civilization and piracy. For Strabo, pirates committed piracy because of the poverty of their land, and thus, the Baleares was unsuitable to be so described. For Florus, the Baleares were savages needing the nurturing influence of Roman rule. The piracy then served for Florus as a proof of their savagery.

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