Musing on the Past: Naevius' *Bellum Poenicum*

This paper examines some of the ways in which Naevius' *Bellum Poenicum* made use of, adapted, and exploited historiographical motifs, as a way more generally of thinking how early Roman writers, both poets and prose writers, approached their past. The paper concentrates on four fragments of Naevius' epic.

The first is Jupiter's prophecy in Book 1 (*FPL*^{4} fr. 14), where Naevius structures Rome's past, present, and future. It is also clear from other testimonia about the poem that Naevius at least mentioned Dido and her sister Anna in the epic (fr. 17 with von Albrecht (1999) 49-50). Now even if there is no direct evidence that Naevius had Aeneas encounter Dido (much less that he made the 'causal' link, as Virgil does, between the earlier encounter of Aeneas and Dido and the later enmity between Rome and Carthage), what is striking is that Naevius, in a poem about the Punic War, thought it necessary or desirable to go back and deal in some way with earliest times: with Aeneas' flight from Troy and Romulus' founding of Rome. We are so used to thinking of Romans as regularly narrating their history *ab urbe condita* that we may not appreciate here the imagination displayed by Naevius in doing this in an epic on a *contemporary* event. Moreover, given the fact that Naevius has a prophecy of future Roman greatness from Jupiter, in the context of Venus' concern for her son's life, it is clear that Naevius already made a sort of 'historical' link between Rome's earliest history – indeed, her prehistory, since Aeneas belongs to the time when the city was not yet founded – and the contemporary world of the Punic Wars.

In his poem Naevius also noted that he had served in the first Punic War, whose history he was composing (fr. 2). Although it is not known where this appeared (see Barchiesi (1962) 512-13), it seems hard to see it as anything other than as a way of establishing some kind of

authority to narrate the events that he does, in precisely the way that historians had done and which Polybius was later to endorse explicitly. Yet it is not clear why a poet would need to do this, especially as we know that Naevius also invoked the Muses. Such an approach, therefore, with its dual modes of asserting authority forces us to reconsider the tidy categories of poetry and history.

The third fragment concerns an unknown figure who reflects on the fortune of mankind (fr. 18). Much ink has been spilled on the person to whom the poet refers (see Flores (2014) 27-8 for various suggestions), but the noteworthy point may be that a person is shown as reflecting on the fortunes of mankind, a theme well known from Polybius' history (see, e.g., 29.20 or 38.21). Since Polybius also says that this theme was common in historians (1.1.2), we might see Naevius' remarks, even without knowing the context, as having a certain common interest and kinship with ideas and modes of expression that we know from earlier and later historiography.

The final fragment is a brief piece of battle narrative from Book 4, where C. Atilius Regulus attacks the island of Malta in 257 (fr. 37). The style is brisk, with five verbs in two lines all in the present tense, a mannerism that is quite common in Roman historiography (it is not uncommon in Greek as well), and the action is told in a vivid style, with the accumulation of actions moving quickly. We cannot know whether or not this was Naevius' manner everywhere in a military narrative; one would rather doubt it. But this straightforward and seemingly unadorned manner was, according to Cicero, characteristic of the early Roman historians (*de Orat*. 2.52ff.; *Leg.* 1.7). He thought historians should write more floridly, of course, but not all agreed with him, and the 'straightforward' manner remained important for later Roman historians. And indeed the vigorous movement of Naevius' lines here offers a useful model for the rapid overview of a military event.

In the conclusion I do not argue for any kind of direct influence of *x* on *y*. Such theses about early Roman literature are always hazardous and must remain so, given the state of our evidence. I try instead to point out, by using the example of Naevius, how, in the early days of Roman literature, a kind of generic flexibility allowed the Romans to explore their past in ways that only later came to be formalized as ‘historic’ and ‘poetic’.

Bibliography

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