

## The Reception of Cato Uticensis and the Confederate Lost Cause

On June 4, 1914, the 106<sup>th</sup> anniversary of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis' birth, sculptor Moses Ezekiel's monument to the Confederacy, called *New South*, was unveiled in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington, DC. The monument is full of references to the ancient Roman world, especially in its sculptural style and the presence of a godly, pseudo-Minerva figure representing the New South. More curiously, Ezekiel inscribed the following quote from Book I of Lucan's *Pharsalia* onto the monument underneath the seal of the Confederacy: "*uictrix causa deis placuit sed uicta Catoni.*" What does Cato have to do with the Lost Cause?

Cato Uticensis was a Roman statesman, moralist, general, and avid defender of the Republic. Though he disliked both Pompey and Julius Caesar, he fought with Pompey against Caesar during the Civil War from 49 to 46 BCE. He became the *de facto* leader against Caesar after Pompey's death in 48 but committed suicide in Utica after Caesar's victory at Thrapus. Robert Goar's text detailing generally how a 'legend' formed around Cato in literature after his death from the first century BCE to the fifth century CE serves as the point of departure for this paper (Goar 1987). Goar concisely analyzes how the myth of Cato was adopted and transformed over time but does not analyze the impact or effects of this myth. The primary concern of this paper is on the legend's impact— almost two millennia later.

This paper explores the reception of the myths of both Cato Uticensis and his ancestor Cato Censorius by antebellum and postbellum Southern white Americans. However it was the former who provided the most inspiration in the postwar period. Then, in order to rationalize the destruction that the Confederacy endured only to lose the Civil War and to distract Southerners

from the largely economic, immoral reason for the war—some plantation owners’ slaves—postbellum Southern elites constructed a cult of the Lost Cause centered on Confederate monuments. These functioned as ritual spaces for remembrance and affirmation of cult doctrine and as visual propaganda. The foremost tenet of this cult was that the South fought the Civil War in defense of state’s rights, not of slavery. However, the cult needed an icon, something more tangible and impactful than abstract ideals, to legitimize the suffering and aftermath of the war. Confederate General Robert E Lee became this icon. He was made after his death into an embodiment of republican, federalist values, since he was the most prominent fighter for those principles. To do this, Southern elites drew on the success of the legend around another defeated, virtuous, republican general—Cato. But subsuming Cato’s republican and moral ethos into Lee was not enough: Lee had to surpass Cato to achieve true deification. Lost Cause elites elevated Lee above Cato by stressing the Christian roots of Lee’s virtue as opposed to the inferior pagan roots of Cato’s Stoic virtue. So at the dedication of the Robert E Lee monument in Richmond, Virginia, Lee formally became, in the words of Archer Anderson “a perfect union of Christian virtue and old Roman manhood” (Anderson 1890).

Quintessential to this argument is the synthesis of two Catos—the republican hero and the virtuous *exemplum*—into one legend that Lost Cause elites then imbued into Lee. This paper establishes the synthesis of Cato into one legend through analysis of the chief architects of the republican Cato and the moral Cato. It argues that in a single line, later quoted by Ezekiel in 1914, Lucan deifies Cato in Book 1 of the *Pharsalia* and makes him the personification of the republican cause, which he reinforces in Book IX. Seneca the Younger, in his *Epistulae* and *De Constantia Sapientis*, augments the godly, republican Cato with a new status as the epitome of successful Stoic sage, an *exemplum of sapiens* to all.

More work is yet to be done unpacking the nuances of the legend of Cato, including its formation and impact during the imperial period. However, this paper prioritizes 19<sup>th</sup> century America due to recent controversy in American political discourse surrounding Confederate monuments and the Lost Cause.

#### Bibliography

- Anderson, Archer. "An address delivered at the dedication of the monument to General Robert Edward Lee at Richmond, Virginia, May 29, 1890." Richmond: W.E. Jones, 1890.
- Goar, Robert J. *The Legend of Cato Uticensis from the First Century B.C. to the Fifth Century A.D.* Bruxelles: Ed. Latomus, 1987.