

Potus est lac: Mela's Nomads, Caesar's Germans

The obscure Hispano-Roman author Pomponius Mela has largely been disparaged by his translators and commentators as an ill-prepared, non-technical writer of popular geography who omitted distances and sources (Silberman 1988, Brodersen 1994, Romer 1998) as well as sites of Roman historical importance (Stahl 1962), and whose work was generally marred with inaccuracies. Batty even suggests that Mela had little interest in the Roman world.

Mela's *Chorographia* of the Mediterranean was never intended to be a technical geographical treatise. It is a work that explores and celebrates Mela's complex identity as a proud native of Tingentera (Hispania Baetica) and as a member of the Roman imperial court (Mela, for example, exalts Claudius as *principum maximus*: 3.49). Mela was a court geographer who aimed to heighten the authority of his treatise as an "official" Roman geography by means of subtle allusions to Claudius' ancestor, Julius Caesar, whose interest in geography and cartography was both practical and profound. Mela seems to have drawn on Caesar for his account of the Druids (*BG* 6.13; Mela 3.18-19) and his ethnography of the Germans (*BG* 6.21-24; Mela 3.26-28). Mela's account of Hispania, furthermore, resonates with Caesar's geographical account of Gaul (*BG* 1.1) in structure and expression.

Mela's compressed ethnography of the Nomads of northern Africa (1.41-47), likewise, owes much to Caesar's ethnography of the Germans (6.21-28) in both style and structure. As in Caesar and other authors who engage with ethnography, ethnographical ecphrases in Mela present a mirror whereby authors underscore their own values and

agendas, past utopias, or a self-perception of cultural and moral superiority. Among many commonalities, Mela's Nomads and Caesar's Germans drink milk, the practice of wandering folk and a sign of barbarity or extreme distance from the center in Homer (*Odyssey* 9.297) Herodotus (4.2, 23), and Strabo (7.3.2, 7; 17.3.8, 15). The "other" (like Caesar's Germans and Mela's Nomads) lack a "civilized" code of marriage, an orderly understanding of law, and a very restricted pantheon that verges on monotheism. What is striking is not so much the overlapping details but rather Mela's appropriation of Caesarian language and structure to describe a people who, like Caesar's Germans, were distant and little understood. It will be shown that Mela, who likely lacked direct experience of governance (cartography at Rome was a function of proconsular magistrates in the provincial field), imitated Caesar to flatter his patron (the emperor Claudius) and to heighten the authority of his own treatise as a Roman (and hence, political or equestrian) geography.

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