

The Refinement of Roman *Virtus* in Libya

Scholars (such as Barton (1972), Raven (1993), Cherry (1998), and Mattingly (2013)) most frequently use the works of ancient historians from Livy to Plutarch to analyze Roman perceptions of Libya, or Roman Africa. These historians' military and ethnographical details about the Carthaginian wars (264-146 B.C.E.) and Caesarean civil war (49-45 B.C.E.) are indeed important for our understanding of Roman conceptions of Libya, but we are able to establish an even more complete picture of Roman characterizations of Libya by extending our focus to the works of the epic poets, who treat Libya as a location for the Roman acquisition of *virtus*.

Examining Roman Africa from the perspective of non-historical literary works is uncommon among both historians and philologists, particularly with regards to Latin epic poetry. This apparent lack of scholarly interest in Libya as it appears in Latin epic, coupled with the rich depictions of Roman Africa as a testing ground for *virtus* in three Latin epic poems, has drawn me to the question: how is the portrayal of Libya as depicted in Vergil's *Aeneid*, Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, and Silius Italicus' *Punica* conducive to the Roman acquisition of *virtus* and how does this *virtus* evolve throughout the three epics? In these works, Libya is depicted as a liminal and harsh environment in which Romans must undergo different labors to test their moral fortitude. Libya, then, with its inhospitable environment and foreign inhabitants, is a place that tests Roman *virtus* more than anywhere else in the empire. As we see, for example, in the *Bellum Civile* 9.371-373, the location of Libya, remote from the trappings of Rome, is what makes it ideal for promoting or honing the *virtus* of Cato:

at inpatiens virtus haerere Catonis
audet in ignotas agmen committere gentes
armorum fidens et terra cingere Syrtim.

Bellum Civile 9.371-373

But the *virtus* of Cato, being impatient, dares to adhere to urging his men on into unknown nations, trusting in their arms, and to go along the Syrtes by land.

Indeed, this topic is of importance not only because it explores a theme that has been neglected by scholars, but also because it stresses the importance of the digressions at the periphery of the Roman Empire in epic and how they truly signify that these locations are just as crucial to Roman identity as Rome itself.

Bibliography

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