

## Livy on POWs in the Early Days of the Republic

2017 is thought to mark the 2000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the great Roman historian Titus Livy. His history of Rome (*Ab Urbe Condita*) was extremely widely read in his own times and remains so today as one of the principle sources both for Roman history and Roman opinions about what happened, even if we are aware that much of the era before 275 BC is a compilation of oral history, patriotic tradition, and legend. Livy has played a great contribution then and now in explaining how Romans thought history took place and he has helped shape modern notions of the Roman world, sometimes beyond his own expectation and even in a few places beyond his intention. Livy's position on POWs in the Roman world is a perfect example of the latter.

In no small part due to Livy, the Roman legionnaire was famous for refusing to surrender and choosing either to fight their way out (and often die trying) or fall on their own sword(s) when escape was impossible. Polybius indirectly mentions this ferocity as a reason that Roman armies defeated Greek armies, and Livy boldly asserts it as part of the Roman martial code. Livy 22.61 ff very clearly asserts that the Romans abandoned the POWs taken at Cannae, and this decision inadvertently created the Roman policy to spurn POWs until victory had been achieved (and the old tradition to diminish their social status was continued for those who were repatriated). The year 216 BC therefore forms the divider line – as a Mason-Dixon Line in time – since the Romans considered all POWs slaves of their captors.

Therefore, Livy has a seeming problem when relating the existence of Roman POWs before 216 BC because they should in theory never have existed, but his sources clearly indicate that they did, despite the disbelief this might raise and the stigma it might create for readers in his own lifetime. Livy, therefore, had to handle this seeming paradox of the Roman POW, which was understood by him since he was a professional historian, but would seem to be an

impossibility to his audience and might even be grounds for an accusation that he was creating a bad name for Romans in his history. How Livy handled this problem without inciting any criticism reveals the fact that he was a first-rate historian, whose mastery of the material brought him above question for any controversy it might seem to create for his less informed readers.