

Libya's Cultural Landscape in the *Bellum Civile*, *Aeneid*, and *Punica*: the Primitive and Mythological versus the Refined and Decadent

In Latin epic, there is a dichotomous representation of Libya's levels of civilization. Since the term Libya, or Roman Africa, includes regions as disparate as the barren desert to the fecund Nile delta, population density, and, thus, concentration of culture, is unevenly distributed. This uneven distribution results in the idea that a given location in Africa in Roman epic may either be uncivilized or overly civilized, often with no middle ground. A stark contrast between the two cultural extremes emerges in their literary representation. Equating these two polarized levels of civilization with implicit moral values further highlights their disparity. Primitive, sparsely inhabited locations are often more morally and metaphorically transparent. They offer either a mythological lesson that edifies, such as the struggle between Hercules and Antaeus in the *Bellum Civile*, or an appalling display of crudeness that cautions or amuses Roman sensibilities, such as the figure of Iarbas in the *Aeneid* or Hannibal's more ill-equipped allies in the *Punica*. More refined, culturally rich areas are thematically complex—particularly depictions of Egypt—scientific, or grossly opulent. Both representations educate their Roman audience in some way, through mythology or overt caricature, and create a sense of otherness that emphasizes how different Romans are from the Libyans. The Romans and their level of civilization, then, should ideally fall somewhere in between the primitive and the excessively refined cultures of Africa.

This topic is of importance not only because it explores a theme that has scarcely been treated by scholars, but also because it broadens the literary scope of Classical Studies to a non-European area that was directly impacted by Roman influence, and, as a result, was adopted into the Roman literary consciousness as an area of caution for the Roman reader.

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