



NORLIT 2011

Conference on literature and politics

ROSKILDE, AUGUST 4.-6. 2011

ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

Papers published in relation to the NORLIT 2011 conference are made available under the CC license [by-nc-nd]. Find the terms of use at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/dk/legalcode>.

Papers, som er offentliggjort i forbindelse med NORLIT 2011 konferencen stilles til rådighed under CC-licens[by-nc-nd]. Læs mere på <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>, hvis du vil vide, hvordan du må gøre brug af de registrerede papers.

Accessible online: <http://ruconf.ruc.dk/index.php/norlit/norlit2011/schedConf/presentations>

Petrarca's Dream

Peter Madsen

When Petrarca received his laurels on Capitol in Rome on Easter Sunday in 1341 he took the event as inauguration of a renewal of ancient Roman culture, and he regarded *Africa* as his major poetic contribution. *Africa* is an unfinished Latin heroic epic poem in the tradition of Vergil, the hero is the young Roman general Scipio Africanus. All of this fits into the ideal of a renewal of Roman culture, yet after the crowning a procession walked from Capitol to the Basilica di San Pietro where Petrarca placed his laurel crown at the altar. The ceremony that Easter Sunday was not only about Roman culture, it was also about Christianity. And so was *Africa*.

I

The major events in the poem are related to the Second Punic War (218-201) and the defeat of Hannibal by the roman general Scipio, usually called Scipio Africanus Maior (236-183), at the battle of Zama in 202. The main source is Titus Livius' Roman history. *Africa* starts out with a dream Scipio has on his way from Spain to Africa before the battle of Zama. In Heaven he meets his father who was defeated by the Carthagians in Spain in 221. The father gives a view of these and future Roman events, among them the defeat of Hannibal, but in fact all the way up to Petrarca's own time, when "a young man" will relate the "heroic deeds" "as a new Ennius" (2.442-44). Then follows an account of the events in Africa. Aspects of African as well as Roman history are told, and Scipio's virtues are praised. Scipio's allied, the Numidian king Syphax, betrays the Romans. After the defeat of Syphax Scipio's other Nubian allied king Massinissa falls in love with Syphax' wife Sophoniba and immediately marries her, yet Scipio rebukes him and orders him to kill her. Negotiations take place between Romans and Carthagians in Africa as well as in Rome, and Hannibal leaves Italy in order to reach Carthago. Then follows the battle of Zama, joined by an assembly of Gods including Roman as well as Carthagian pleas in front of Jupiter, who provides a prophecy. Scipio gets the upper hand in the battle. After various events in Africa as well as in Rome a peace treaty is decided. The last book has a conversation between Scipio and the poet Ennius – here again there are references to Petrarca and the poem, Scipio returns to Rome in triumph and Petrarca concludes his poem.

In Petrarca's view contemporary Rome was in a sorry state and in need of renewal through imitation of not only Roman poetry, but also Roman virtues. Scipio of Petrarca's *Africa* is the incarnation of these virtues, he is *pious* and *virtuous*. Whereas Dante could think in terms of *translatio imperii* and regard the German emperors as legitimate heirs to imperial power, in Petrarca's view there was no continuity, legitimate power belonged to Rome and was in need of *resurrection* and *imitation* of the ancient Roman Empire. This is the basic intention behind *Africa*.

Yet Africa's Scipio is also a proto-Christian. When Hannibal is talking about the Gods and Fortune, Scipio prefers to talk about one god: "But that God, the God you hold in contempt [...]" (7.395) And he counters Hannibal's reference to *Fortune* insisting that "(...) no power is like that of the highest God" (7.422) Scipio also insists on the *just* character of his warfare. A concept of *just war* was articulated in Roman antiquity, but the implied reference is to the tradition from Augustine and onwards. In *The City of God* Augustine wrote: "For the practice of God's providence is to improve or destroy the corrupt morals of men through war [...]" Infringements of Christian norms ('God's laws') may motivate and justify warfare, and the doctrine that infidels should be 'invited in' could turn into justification of war against infidels *tout court*. As one commentator has it: "Augustine saw all forms of religious belief other than orthodoxy as posing a common threat to the faith, and he eventually concluded that the ecclesiastical hierarchy had the right and the duty to seek imperial coercion of heretics *qua* heretics." Within a similar frame of justification a *just and pious war* became something quite different than what was meant by these terms in the Roman context.

Now, it is remarkable that the battle of Zama in the words of the poet is interpreted as *decisive* by both sides: "Command of the entire world for centuries beckoned the victors, the worst threatened the conquered." The perspective is imperial global power. Translated into the context of Petrarca's own times it seems that this would mean a just and decisive Christian war with a view of global imperial power fought against an enemy with similar ambitions. The war in Africa was preceded by the struggle over Spain. In *Africa* there are numerous references to the history of Roman conquering, Carthagian invasion and new Roman victories in Spain. The Punic war is a battle over the Mediterranean that evokes later confrontations.

II

A digression in Petrarca's *De vita solitaria* demonstrates what kind of implications may have been on his mind when he at the time he wrote this book also was working on *Africa*.

"Oh, that [the Roman Empire] would be there today too! Then the entire Africa would not be under the delusion, or Persia, Syria, Egypt, nearly the entire Asia, and worse than that most of Europe. For that Roman Empire of the Antiquity was only, as respected authors affirms, lacking a small part of the Orient, whereas, painfully, we are lacking all except a modest part of the Occident."¹

The rule of Rome might seem cruel, yet it was a *just* rule, since it "was an advantage for the subjected people, and it was necessary, even if perhaps a heavy lot, that one, and undeniably the best city, governed the entire world" (184). Augustine had pointed out that: "the Christian sacrament is present in all the populated countries" (179), Petrarca adds: "This short sentence brings us to tears, and it can easily bring the enormity of our turpitude to mind." (179) Unfortunately contemporary leaders are driven by "urge for lust and hatred of virtue" (181), and they are entangled in mutual conflicts, although they ought to "take their sword in hand for the sake of Jesus", as Petrarca wrote in one of the poems in his *Canzoniere* (#28).

¹ Petrarca wrote the first version of this text in 1346.

The major enemy is the followers of Mohammad (181), and in particular "the Egyptian dog" (i.e. the sultan in Cairo) who "unpunished destroy the holy places and tear off our head, while our limbs do not move, and the infidels are stamping on Christ's sanctuary" (180). Yet Petrarca is not only thinking about the Holy Land, it is the entire Mediterranean area he has in mind. The Roman heroes are the models: Augustus "broke down resistance" in Spain, the elder Scipio made Africa pay tributes to Rome and the younger Scipio finally destroyed Carthago, Pompeius fought in the East. These are the models to follow, yet not only do the European sovereigns not grasp their swords in order to liberate the Holy Land, in Spain "the most powerful sovereign procrastinates and cowardly allows that on a tiny cliff within his borders the Majesty of Christ is blasphemously smeared." (176) Here Petrarca is thinking of the Emirate of Granada, at his time the last stronghold of Muslim power in Spain. The construction of Alhambra was actually completed around the time Petrarca worked on his book.

"This is no doubt the situation in Europe," Petrarca sums up (*De vita solitaria*, 177). At the center of his vision is Rome and Italy, but the perspective is European. His dream of a new Rome is thus a dream of a renewed empire that brings together Christian faith and European imperial rule. The precondition at the level of faith was not least the defeat of the followers of Muhammad - "the slaughter", "this villainous and vile scoundrel, who had deserved to be thrown for the wolfs and crows" (181).²

III

But let us return to *Africa*. Titus Livius describes how Massinissa after the defeat of Syphax rushes to take his palace. Here he is met by Syphax's wife Sophoniba. About her Titus Livius has this one sentence: "She was remarkably beautiful, and in the full bloom of youth."³ Petrarca to the contrary at this point provides an elaborate description:"

² Apart from the question of Jerusalem the development towards the east could give Petrarca and his contemporaries reason to worry about Muslim expansion. In general the time of the crusades had included many fights over cities and areas on the coasts of Syria and Anatolia, but during Petrarca's early years the emerging Osmanli power took over two significant cities near Constantinople. Niceae (present day Iznik) – one of the centers of early Christianity - had been the capital of the Byzantine Empire 1204-1261 after the capture of Constantinople during the fourth crusade. In 1331 (when Petrarca was 27 years old) it was taken by Orhan I and incorporated in the Ottoman Empire, after nearby Bursa had been taken in 1326. The entire Northern Africa, basically what counted as Africa for Petrarca, was Muslim: "If you move through Africa and on the wings of the spirit travel from the sources of the Nile to the Atlantic (i.e. through former Roman colonies), you will find nobody, except foreigners, merchants and captives that know or appreciate our language." (177-178) Although the historical tendency in Spain went in the opposite direction of the Osmanli expansion in the East, most of Spain had for centuries been under Muslim rule. Toledo came under Christian rule in 1086, yet it was only in the 13th century, i.e. 60-70 years before the birth of Petrarca (in 1304) that Cordoba (1236) and Sevilla (1248) were conquered by Christian forces, and Granada remained Muslim more than 100 years after Petrarca's death.

³ *The History of Rome* (Books XXVII-XXXVI), 2009, p. 127 (XXX.12)

[...] that brow, / As white as snow, might stir almighty Jove / To wonder [...] / With brighter gleam than gold of any land, / putting the sun's own rays to shame, her locks [...]" (V.21-31, 35-36)

The description of her beauty goes on and on for more than 50 lines, and her appearance and appeal have the effect she is wishing for:

"Massinissa felt / A flame consume his marrows, even as ice / Melts in the heat of summer or as wax / Dissolves in the proximity of fire, / So as he looked he melted, captive prey / Of captive foe, a haughty conqueror / Subdued by conquered victim. [...]" (V.93-100)

Now, it is striking that a number of formulations in the description of the seductive Sophoniba are very similar to formulations in poems about Petrarca's beloved Laura in the *Canzoniere*. Here are two examples. In *Africa*: "she moves not as mere mortals do" (V.76), and in the *Canzoniere*: "The way she walked was not the way of mortals" (90.9); in *Africa*: "even as ice / Melts in the heat of summer or as wax / Dissolves in the proximity of fire, / So as she looked he melted" (V.93-96), a formulation that might recall three different formulations in the *Canzoniere*: "Snow never disappeared beneath the sun, as I felt myself melt entirely" (23.115), (Never has there been seen such lovely eyes [...]) "as those that melt me as the sun does snow" (30.21); and: "Love's made me like a target for his arrows, like snow in sun, like wax within a fire, and like mist in wind." (133.1-3)

IV

There are thus echoes between the effect of the Carthaginian Sophoniba on the Nubian Massinissa and the effect of Laura on Petrarca. There is a related parallel between on one hand Scipio's critique of Massinissa and the critique of Petrarca's own love for Laura that is articulated in the dialogue between Augustine and Petrarca in the third book of his *Secretum meum*. According to Augustine love and fame are too much on Petrarca's mind, but as far as love is concerned Petrarca insists on the refined character of his beloved: "her voice, the light of her eyes, yes even her walking is not that of a mortals" (313) Here, once again, the way of walking that is more than human! Yet Augustine is not impressed:

"By now you have nurtured your heart with such false ideas for sixteen years. It was not for a longer time Italy's most famous enemy waged war, the country did not at that time experience the attack of weapons more often and did not suffer the heat of flames more than you during these years suffered the vehement flames and the assault of passion. At that time there was one who chased the enemy out of the country; but who will ever chase your Hannibal out of your mind, when you decline and when you long since is enslaved and out of your free will asks him to stay." (313)

According to Augustine Petrarca is – as Massinissa in Africa – a captive prey, subdued by African forces. The analogy between Hannibal and Laura recalls the role of Sophoniba. The dreamlike condensation so to speak sends Laura in an African exile. In this piece of textual dream work

Scipio, Petrarca's Roman hero, and Augustine, his major Christian reference, are joining forces in a battle for his soul. The enemy is love incarnate, i.e. Laura/Sophoniba, as well as the major enemy of Rome, i.e. the Africans, primarily represented by Hannibal. But then again, as Scipio in *Africa*, the poem, is turned into a proto-Christian and is depicted as the ideal that should be reborn in order to recreate the Roman Empire, so also the enemy has - as we have seen - its contemporary equivalent: the Egyptian dog, the Emirate of Granada, the Saracens, Arabs, Muslims, Turks of the Mediterranean sphere.