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Tempestas Punici belli Notes on Three “Meteorological” Passages from Florus’s *Epitome of Roman History*

Abstract: When describing the first three Roman defeats in the Second Punic War, at the rivers Ticinus and Trebia and also at Lake Trasimene, Florus used meteorological metaphor which allowed him to diminish the scope of Roman defeat.

Key words: Second Punic War, Florus, Livy, Hannibal

What deserves considerable attention in Florus’s Second Punic War narrative is the metaphor the author uses. When describing the beginnings of struggle with Hannibal and first confrontations in Italy, Florus used the vocabulary pertaining to meteorological phenomena.¹ He was very consistent in creating the successive battle scenes of 218 and 217 BC. The first three battles took place at the rivers Ticinus and Trebia at the end of 218 and the battle of Lake Trasimene took place in the following year. The description style of the fourth battle mentioned by the historian, the battle of Cannae, is slightly different, yet also abundant with meteorological vocabulary.

There are two trends in ancient literature dealing with meteorological phenomena.² The first one is more philosophical in nature and focuses mainly on explaining them. The second one is connected with the observation and possibly

¹ L. Bessone: *La storia epitomata. Introduzione a Floro*. Roma 1996, p. 177ff.

² See: L. Taub: *Ancient Meteorology*. London–New York 2003, p. 7ff.

prediction of the weather phenomena. Florus uses metaphor relating to natural phenomena. This trend has not been studied yet, at least not historiographically.

In the *Epitome*, the first word that relates to natural phenomena is *tempestas*.³ *Tempestas* means storm, or rainstorm, also understood metaphorically as violent disturbance in social or political circumstances.⁴ The historian defines it as *illa gravis et luctuosa Punici belli vis atque tempestas*, meaning a difficult and deadly force and ravage of Punic War. He also mentions its beginnings, declaring that it started in Spain *ubi semel se in Hispania movit*, and its direction – from Saguntum to Rome. This lightning, destined for Romans for a long time, sparked off Saguntinian fire – *destinatumque Romanis iam diu fulmen Saguntino igne conflavit*. This would then be a storm with thunder and lightning. It might be an ordinary lightning, threatening with sudden strike, or *fulmen* may be the metaphor for Hannibal himself, many times before described as fire, a flame of a lightning – *fax* and *ignis*, πῦρ.⁵ Also the nickname Barca may mean a lightning, since some scholars identify it as Greek κεραυνός.⁶

In the same sentence Florus brings Hannibal to Italy, he does not attempt, however, at an epic description of the crossing of the Alps. He merely states that this thunderstorm was blown across the Alps by a sudden gust of wind – *statim quodam impetu rapta medias perfregit Alpes*, and then it fell over Italy from snow-covered high mountain peaks as if it had been sent from the sky – *et in Italiam ab illis fabulosae altitudinis nivibus velut caelo missa descendit*. In this short description, Florus used an adverb *statim* to emphasize the speed at which the Carthaginians acted and how unpredictable and sudden their appearance was, and when they did appear, also how inevitable it was by comparing their arrival in Italy or rather the descent from the Alps to a rainfall – *velut caelo missa*.

The author might have been inspired to use weather metaphor in his description of the beginnings of the Second Punic War by a similar metaphor found in Livy. In the book 31, towards the end of the narrative on Carthaginian and Roman battles, a somehow concluding [...] *ingentem illam tempestatem Punici belli*⁷ can be found. Naturally, the main source of the *Epitome* was *Ab urbe condita* by Livy, but whether the above quoted fragment, lost in the plethora of other sentences, had any influence on Florus's style is impossible to prove.

Taking the weather metaphors further, Florus provides the description of the battle at the river Ticinus. He himself defines it as the battle *inter Padum atque*

³ Flor. 1, 22, 9.

⁴ I. Opelt: *Die lateinischen Schimpfwörter und verwandte sprachliche Erscheinungen. Eine Typologie*. Heidelberg 1965, p. 137.

⁵ Liv. 21, 10, 11: *hunc iuvenem tamquam furiam facemque huius belli*; Liv. 21, 3, 6: *ne quandoque parvus hic ignis incendium ingens exsuscitet*; Plut. *Flam.* 21, 7: καὶ τὸν Ἀννίβαν ἕως ἔζη πῦρ ἠγοούμενοι δεόμενον τοῦ ῥιπίζοντος and Plut. *Fab. Max.* 2, 4.

⁶ G. Charles-Picard: *Hannibal*. Warszawa 1971, p. 14.

⁷ Liv. 31, 10, 6.

Ticinum, thus between Ticinus and Padus, but modern day historians favour *Ticinus apud Padum*.⁸ This was the first battle between Carthaginians and Romans in Italy and as such it was also described by Florus – *ac primi quidem impetus turbo inter Padum atque Ticinum*.⁹ *Primi impetus turbo* is a gale or a hurricane of the first attack of the Carthaginians, as it would seem, and this gale struck with a powerful thunder – *valido statim fragore detonuit*. Also here the epitomist highlights the time sequence by means of the adverb *statim*. The battle was won by the Carthaginians and the army of Publius Cornelius Scipio was completely defeated – *tum Scipione duce fusus exercitus*. Scipio himself was surrounded by his enemies, wounded and eventually rescued by his son – Publius Cornelius Scipio later Africanus.

A month later, in December 218 BC, the battle at the river Trebia took place. Florus described it as the second storm of the Punic War – *secunda Punici belli procella*. The storm was raging over Trebia during Sempronius Longus's consulate – *hic secunda Punici belli procella desaevit Sempronio consule*. Hannibal achieved another victory over Roman army despite severe weather conditions. On the day of the battle it was snowing: *frigidum et nivalem nacti diem*, before the battle the Carthaginians had a meal, rubbed their bodies with oil and were getting armed by the fire: *cum se ignibus prius oleoque fovissent*. This most probably gave them the advantage during the battle, on which Florus commented in the following way: *horrible dictu, homines a meridie et sole venientes nostra nos hieme vicerunt*. The Carthaginians arriving from the sunny south defeated the Romans with their own winter weather.

The third battle took place at Lake Trasimene in June 217 BC. According to Florus, the battle was again a lightning, a sudden strike – *fulmen: Trasymennus lacus tertium fulmen Hannibalis imperatore Flamínio*.¹⁰ It was another battle where weather played an important role. A thick fog (*nebula*) covered the lake shore, Florus states *quippe nebula lacus palustribusque virgultis tectus equitatus terga subito pugnantium invasit* – the cavalry enveloped in lake fog and marshy brush suddenly attacked the fighting. Lack of visibility hindered the Roman efforts. Once again the adverb – *subito* – emphasizing the suddenness of the situation is used, which corresponds with the unexpected aspect of *fulmen*.

To describe another battle or, to be more precise, another Roman defeat, which took place on 2nd of August 216 BC at Cannae, Florus could not find any weather-related epithet. He could only describe it as *vulnus*, since the battle was not only a defeat but also a wound. He wrote: *Quartum id est paene ultimum vulnus imperii Cannae*¹¹ – the fourth and almost deadly wound to the empire was Cannae. Naturally, the historian made room for descriptions of weather phenomena. The

⁸ See: M. Wołny: *Hannibal w Italii (218–217 p.n.e.)*. Olsztyn 2007, pp. 155–157.

⁹ Flor. 1, 22, 10.

¹⁰ Flor. 1, 22, 15.

¹¹ Flor. 1, 22, 12.

following fragment contains the praise of the Carthaginian leader, his experience and commanding abilities:

[...] callidus imperator in patentibus campis, observato loci ingenio, quod et sol ibi acerrimus et plurimus pulvis et Eurus ab oriente semper quasi ad constitutum, ita instruxit aciem, ut Romanis adversus haec omnia obversis secundum caelum tenens vento pulvere sole pugnaret.¹²

After examining the area, checking where the sun is the brightest (*sol ibi acerrimus*), where there is the most dust (*plurimus pulvis*), how the wind blows, Hannibal arranged his army in such order that he could fight when the sky was clear, wind favourable (*vento*) and blowing from behind, and with the help of dust (*pulvere*) and sun (*sole*), both of which the Romans were facing. The wind was called *volturnus* (according to Serge Lancel, the modern name of the wind is *libeccio*),¹³ and blew the Romans straight in the face raising clouds of dust. That is why Florus did not hesitate to write that the Carthaginian acted in cooperation or even conspiracy (*consensit*) with the earth (*terra*), sky (*caelum*), daylight (*dies*) and finally with the whole nature (*tota rerum natura*).

Further into the narrative, we discover that in 211 BC, when Hannibal set out to conquer Rome, nature was not so favourable – according to Florus, he was hit by torrential rain (*tanta [...] vis imbrium effusa*), and powerful winds (*tanta ventorum violentia coorta est*), which forced him to retreat, although modern historians believe it was gale rather than rain and wind.¹⁴

I quote here the description of the battle of Cannae and the arrival of Hannibal in Rome only as a way to provide more detail in the discussion of the weather-related metaphor of Florus, in order to demonstrate that the analysed concepts were not rare. All the expressions – *tempestas*, *procella* and *turbo* were used metaphorically referring to a threat, frequently on a national level. An interesting example where all three expressions are used is a fragment of Cicero's speech *De domo sua ad haruspices*, which was given in 57 BC and where the speaker addresses Clodius directly saying: *tu procella patriae, turbo ac tempestas pacis atque otii*.¹⁵

The fact that the expressions proliferate in the successive paragraphs in Florus's text suggests their intentional and well-planned use. Such narrative is hardly a novelty, Florus himself uses the term *tempestas* three more times – once to talk about the Asian War (*Asiatici belli tempestas*)¹⁶ and twice pointing at the source of unrest – one time at Gaius Marius and twice at Lucius Cornelius Sulla: *inde Mari-*

¹² Flor. 1, 22, 12.

¹³ S. Lancel: *Hannibal*. Warszawa 2001, p. 166.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 207.

¹⁵ Cic. *Dom.* 137. See also E. Fantham: *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery*. Toronto 1972, p. 128 and I. Opelt: *Die lateinischen Schimpfwörter...*, p. 137.

¹⁶ Flor. 1, 24, 8.

*ana, inde Sullana tempestas*¹⁷ and *Sullana tempestas*.¹⁸ The use of weather-related metaphor on one hand allows the writer to make his historical narrative more varied and on the other hand to show that the arrival of Carthaginians was sudden and surprising, possibly causing fear and panic, the struggle was violent and required a lot of strength and effort, and defeating them – just as fighting a storm or a wind – was beyond the reach of the Romans. According to some historians,¹⁹ Florus's *Epitome of Roman History* is in fact a panegyric of the Roman nation. Being defeated by nature fits perfectly into such historiographic concept.

¹⁷ Flor. 1, 47, 12.

¹⁸ Flor. 2, 13, 2.

¹⁹ More on the topic, see: I. Lewandowski: *Historiografia rzymska*. Poznań 2007, p. 349.