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The Suicides of Hannibal Barca and Dido Compared

Hannibal Barca and Dido of Carthage are two of the most widely known classical Carthaginian figures. However, the only stories which survive today are those which were told by the nation which destroyed theirs, Rome. Both figures resided in time periods separated by centuries but were bound together by a common homeland. An additional point of similarity, is the nature of both their deaths being self-afflicted. These figures were both driven to suicide, but how these suicides were interpreted by those that reported and wrote about these figures were greatly affected by their identities as Carthaginians. Compared to the narratives of Roman suicides among both men and women, there are key differences regarding Carthaginian figure's depiction.

Dido was the legendary founding queen of Carthage, said to have founded the Phoenician colony and city-state in 814 BC. In Justin's epitome of the 44-volume history, *Philippic Histories and the Origin of the Whole World and the Places of the Earth*, originally written by Gnaeus Pomponius Trogus in the time of Augustus, a historical account of Dido's founding of Carthage is included, in which she is referred to as Elissa.¹ Elissa was originally a princess of Tyre until in 831 BC her father, king Mattan, announced that his two children, Pygmalion and Elissa, would be co-rulers after his death. Due to concerns about the instability that could result from two rulers, Pygmalion was crowned as the sole ruler of Tyre instead of alongside Elissa, and she

¹ Alonso-Núñez, J. M. "An Augustan World History: The 'Historiae Philippicae' of Pompeius Trogus." *Greece & Rome* 34, no. 1 (1987): 56–72.

remained a princess. However, Pygmalion immediately took to eliminating any political threats, starting with Elissa's husband and their shared uncle Acherbas. Elissa, fearing her brother, deceived him and secretly fled Tyre with similarly at risk and dissatisfied Tyrian nobles opposed to Pygmalion's methods. With these nobles, she founded Carthage, which experienced immediate success and wealth. As her kingdom grew in influence more and more, the neighboring Libyan king Iarbas grew resentful, he eventually threatened war unless Elissa married him. The elders of Carthage were hesitant to tell Elissa of this, she pressured them by telling them they "should not shirk a hard life if it was beneficial for their new homeland." The elders then used her own words to pressure her into marriage, as it was beneficial for the people of Carthage, Elissa then ordered a pyre to be constructed to make sacrifices to appease the spirit of her deceased husband. Elissa then ascended the lit pyre, and announced to her people that she would return to her husband "as they desired," meaning that she would only ever consider Acherbas her husband and not Iarbas, finally stabbing herself to death with a sword.²

Vergil's *Aeneid*, written between 29 and 19 BC to establish a mythological foundation for Rome, and legitimize the rule of the current Emperor Augustus, Gnaeus Pompinus Trogus referred to Elissa by a more familiar name, Dido. Within, she fell in love with the Trojan hero and mythological founder of Rome, Aeneas. King Iarbas heard of this affair and prayed to his father Jupiter, as he desired Dido for himself. Jupiter ordered Aeneas to leave Carthage and continue his quest to Italy so he could eventually establish Rome. Distraught by Aeneas' departure, Dido had her sister build a pyre under the pretense of burning all of the clothes and weapons Aeneas left behind. Watching him leave, she proclaimed endless hatred between the people of Carthage and Rome, and that an avenger will rise from her ashes to defeat Rome, she

² Miles, Richard. *Carthage must be destroyed: The rise and fall of an ancient civilization*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014.

then ascended the pyre to lie on the couch she once shared with Aeneus and fell upon Aeneus' own sword, killing herself.³ The conventional manner of suicide for classical heroines within literature was often through hanging. For example, heroines such as Antigone within Sophocles' *Antigone*, Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Jocasta in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and Amata, who, similarly to Dido, is also from Virgil's *Aeneid*, all committed suicide through hanging.⁴ The use of the sword, in Dido's case is unconventional due to the sword's archetypically masculine associations and usage within war. Most likely, within Nepos, this sword further symbolizes the influence of Aeneus. Containing both potentially phallic imagery of Aeneus' "penetration" of Dido, and the symbolic interpretation of Aeneus as Rome eventually destroying Carthage, or Dido. The "avenger" which she refers to, is commonly accepted to be Nepos referring to Hannibal, and the devastating military defeats Rome suffered at his hands. Dido's death functions as a way to mimic the eventual fall of Carthage at the hands of Rome, and to imply that her prophecy that between Rome and Carthage, only one would eventually stand,⁵ indirectly caused the fall of her own kingdom.

Lucretia was known as the "best" woman of Rome, she was a noblewoman married to Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus. The story of Lucretia has been reiterated by various writers across time, the most influential surviving accounts being from Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus' account from about 7 BC, Ovid's account written shortly after, Plutarch's account, and Cassius Dio's collection, *Roman History*. Across all, the marriage between Lucretia and her husband was depicted as the ideal Roman marriage, emphasizing Lucretia as a perfect and virtuous wife. So much so that when Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus boasted of his wife's virtues,

³ Virgil, and Robert Fagles. *The Aeneid*. New York: Penguin Books, 2010.

⁴ Edgeworth, R. J. "The Death of Dido." *The Classical Journal* 72, no. 2 (1976): 129–33.

⁵ Virgil, and Robert Fagles. *The Aeneid*.

Sextus Tarquinius, one of the sons of the last king of Rome, tried to threaten her into marrying him. When Lucretia refused, exemplifying her virtue as a loyal wife, he took advantage of and raped her. Afterwards, Lucretia requested from her father and husband that they would pledge to take revenge on Tarquin for her, then stabbed herself in the heart with a dagger. The rape of Lucretia is credited as the event which resulted in the revolution which overthrew the Tarquin royal family and the establishment of the Roman republic, ending the monarchy and ushering in an age of democracy.⁶

Compared to Lucretia, the interpretation of Dido within the *Phillipic Histories* known as Elissa is characterized as less purely virtuous, and whether through necessity or not, more deceitful. Her actions within *Phillipic Histories* were often repeatedly characterized manipulative, and she in fact is partially blamed for her situation of being unable to turn down the proposal of King Iarbas for her manipulative way of speaking. However, these were often in service of the greater good of her people, and her death is ultimately an act of virtuous chastity in refusing to marry another man after her husband's death. In this way, the motive of chastity and honor makes her suicide similar to Lucretia's own, being tied to her chastity through its status as an expression of her devastation at its forcible loss, therefore becoming a marker of her virtue as a Roman woman. She does not perform a "perfect" form of (Roman) femininity like Lucretia does, however she is an undoubtably moral and heroic character. Dido is likely characterized this way in *Phillipic Histories* as an expression of her Carthaginian-ness, and the belief that it is due to her Carthaginian identity she acted this way and that it is because she belonged to a society which many Romans believed to be deceitful. This stereotype results in the idea that if she was Roman, she would have been a "perfect woman" like Lucretia, but her Carthaginian-ness made

⁶ Donaldson, Ian. *The rapes of Lucretia : a myth and its transformations*. Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1982

her prone to “immoral actions” or because she was raised in Phoenician society, and the progenitor and founder of Carthaginian society, she was unaware of the immorality present. Within the *Aeneid*, Dido is similarly characterized as dutiful and working in the service of her people best interests and the deceitful and manipulative traits are significantly lessened, not being present at all or to a negligible degree. Dido’s death is more symbolically tied with Carthage itself, she as Carthage has been “conquered” by the metaphorical Rome of Aeneas, and because of her passion for him, both hatred and love, she dies. Where Dido’s death and the preceding prophecy is implied to be the cause her nations end, Lucretia’s is the birth of a new one, representing the rise of the Roman republic.

Hannibal Barca was a Carthaginian general that lived from 247 BCE to around 183-1 BCE. The most influential accounts detailing his life story come from Livy, Cornelius Nepos, and Polybius. Livy wrote *Ab Urbe Condita*, or *The History of Rome*, in between 27 and 9 BCE. Hannibal was featured within a section of its books within context of recounting the events of the Punic wars as a part of Roman history and functioned as a historical document. Cornelius Nepos wrote *De Viris Illustribus*, or *The Lives of Eminent Commanders*. Nepos was a biographer, and *The Lives of Eminent Commanders* was meant to detail the lives of influential military figures at the time, it contained several volumes however the only surviving one is *Liber de Excellentibus Ducibus Exterarum Gentium*, or *Book of Eminent Generals of Foreign Nations*. The intention of this text was to highlight the virtues and exceptional deeds of foreign military generals, from which Roman audiences could learn from. He was the son of the influential Carthaginian general Hamilcar Barca, who according to Nepos allowed Hannibal to join him in the Carthaginian army encampment in Spain when Hannibal was no more than 9 years old, but only if Hannibal took an oath to forever hate the Roman people. According to many Roman accounts of Hannibal’s life,

he made good on that oath as the leading Carthaginian general throughout the majority of the Second Punic War. Hannibal led numerous successful expeditions against Roman forces, becoming one of the most feared enemy commanders in Roman history after displaying his tactical brilliance in the Battle of Cannae, which is considered one of Rome's most devastating military defeats. After the war, Hannibal was eventually exiled from Carthage and fled to various courts until when in Bithynia Roman envoys surrounded his residence. Instead of being captured, Hannibal chose to willingly imbibe poison to commit suicide, at this point of time Hannibal had regularly kept poison on his person, according to Nepos, likely anticipating an emergency such as the one described.⁷

Poison was often viewed as a feminine tool by Romans, in fact when an unknown pestilence or disease resulted in the unexplained deaths of influential men, matrons, wives and slave women were often suspected and prosecuted by the state as purposefully poisoning their husbands or masters. In one case, the wife of a consul, Hostilia, was blamed for plotting the entire outbreak and was sentenced to death on circumstantial evidence, along with three thousand other women.⁸ Many women within Rome likely could have resorted to poisoning for a multitude of reasons, however it is also likely that many accusations were simultaneously the result of scapegoating and prejudice. Poison has also been associated with the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC, as she committed suicide through poisoning in order to avoid capture by Roman forces, she shares similar motives and methods to Hannibal. However, since the exact date of when the book *Life of Hannibal*, within *The Lives of Eminent Commanders*, was published

⁷ Nepos, Cornelius, Rolfe, J.C. (1929). *Cornelius Nepos : Life of Hannibal*.

<http://www.attalus.org/translate/nepos23.html>

⁸ Kaufman, David B. "Poisons and Poisoning among the Romans." *Classical Philology* 27, no. 2 (1932): 156–67.

whether Cleopatra had died or not when Nepos wrote the text is debatable, though he would have been aware of it when it happened. Nevertheless, historically this sets a precedent for foreign leaders committing suicide through poison rather than being dishonored by their enemy. This denotes a shared value of “death before dishonor,” either transcending culture and time, influenced by the shared values of Roman authors writing these narratives, or due to a shared knowledge of the humiliation they would face at the hands of Romans. Hannibal’s use of poison, while exemplifying his devotion to retaining his honor through death and the qualities of an accomplished general, it also is possible to simultaneously betray Roman concepts of the use of poison being “sneaky” in part due to its use outside of military contexts often being associated with women.

Within Plutarch’s *Cato Minor*, written in 75 AD, the suicide of Cato the younger could not bear to live under the reign of Caesar, after the government which once upheld his republican ideals was replaced with an autocracy under which Cato felt it was impossible to operate in a moral way compliant with his Stoic philosophy. Representing the struggle between the reality of life influenced by politics and philosophical ideals, especially under the reign of Caesar. This account was written long after Cato the younger’s death in 46 BC, as well as Caesar’s rule. Instead, it was written during the rule of Emperor Vespasian, the founding member of the Flavian dynasty. *Cato Minor* was written from a clear stance of disapproval for Caesar’s reign; thus, he used this text to emphasize that the autocratic system of Caesar was in direct conflict with men’s ability to make moral choices. This depiction of Cato the younger’s suicide resulted in the death of Cato the younger being heroized and considered a martyr, in order to establish him as an inspiration to other figures which opposed Caesar later in life.⁹ Both Cato the younger and

⁹ Griffin, Miriam. “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: I.” *Greece & Rome* 33, no. 1 (1986): 64–77.

Hannibal killed themselves to escape a Roman regime with which they did not agree, however one was within this regime and the other an outsider, and the framing of their dissatisfaction with Rome is entirely different. In Plutarch's account the external forces of Caesar's reign are depicted as an explicitly negative force that drives Cato the younger to suicide, while in Nepos' account of Hannibal's suicide, though the Roman forces play a similar role, they are depicted in a much more neutral light. It is their right to pursue Hannibal, even if he is portrayed more heroically within Nepos, he is still an enemy to the Roman state. Despite being exiled from Carthage, the death of Hannibal still signifies a huge loss for Carthage as an independent power able to rival Rome, now that the man who dedicated his life to consolidating power for Carthage was gone.

The chief theme throughout the suicides of both Hannibal and Dido was the cultural value placed on honor, and the valorization of the idea of death before being humiliation in both a social and military context. The prevalence of this theme within Roman literature often resulted in the idea this was a common practice among soldiers; however, suicide was often used as a tool to represent this value taken to its most extreme. These cases detailed are instead exceptional, rather than expected from soldiers and leaders.¹⁰ They exhibit the most extreme cases of national pride, and honor, which result in their suicide and as they are destroyed by this sense of honor, so is the power of Carthage diminished with the death of symbolic figureheads such as them. Both figures' motivations for suicide were ultimately largely influenced by their genders, and the social identities which were crafted around their genders, especially how Roman authors perceived them based their genders, and how that effected their identities as Carthaginian's in Roman eyes. The undeniable fact is, however, that no matter the interpretation Dido and

¹⁰ Rau, Stanley H. "The Tradition of Suicide in Rome's Foreign Wars." *TAPA* 145, no. 2 (2015): 383–410.

Hannibal were characterized as heroes of Carthage, even if Carthage was not a favorable place to be from in Roman eyes.

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