

THE AUGUSTAN POETS AND SPAIN

Los poetas augusteos tuvieron a su disposición abundantes informes históricos y geográficos sobre Hispania. Sin embargo, se diferencian mucho entre sí en su utilización de tales datos. Así, Virgilio, Ovidio y Propertio se contentan con repetir viejos temas de origen griego o republicano, tales como el ganado de Gerión y la puesta del sol en el océano ibérico. Solo Horacio trata sobre la Península Ibérica de manera innovadora. Entre sus referencias a los productos de Hispania, hallamos como primeras menciones en literatura clásica el *garum* y la cuerda hispanos. Además, Horacio alude repetidas veces a un evento contemporáneo, la guerra de Augusto en Cantabria.

The principate of Augustus was a great age for the writing of history and geography as well as poetry. Livy was preparing his 142-volume *Ab Urbe Condita*, Pompeius Trogus his 44-volume *Historiae Philippicae* (preserved in the epitome by Justin), Strabo his 17-book *Geographica*;¹ Agrippa compiled notes (*commentarii*) for a map of the world, completed by Augustus;² and there were undoubtedly other scholars whose works do not survive. In all these historical and geographical writings, Spain naturally played a prominent role, being Rome's first mainland province and famed for its economic resources. Moreover, Spain was a topic of contemporary history, as Augustus fought his famous campaign against the Cantabrians (26-19 B.C.). It is therefore interesting to ask to what extent this newly compiled knowledge of Spain informed the writings of the Augustan poets.

Vergil obviously could not include contemporary events in his story of Aeneas, but he could have used up-to-date geographical knowledge to enhance his tale. Instead, his references to Spain are conventional and disappointing. In *Aen.* 8,201-4 he retails the myth of the Spanish cattle of Geryon, one of the canonical labours of Hercules. Elsewhere he refers to the sun's chariot descending into the Spanish ocean (*gurgite Hiberno*), a clear borrowing from the early Greek poets.³ In *georg.* 3,408 Vergil mentions dogs guarding against attacks by Iberian brigands. This too is a well-worn *topos*: the reputation of

¹ Although Strabo's work was not published until early in the reign of Tiberius, the information he reports would have been available to other Augustan writers.

² Plin. *nat.* 3,17.

³ *Aen.* 11,913; cf. Hom. *Il.* 8,485; *h.Hom.* 31,15-16.

Spaniards, especially the Lusitanians, as robbers is amply attested in Republican authors.⁴

Ovid, like Vergil, makes the traditional allusions to the herds of Geryon and to the sun setting in the Iberian stream.⁵ His references to the gold of the river Tagus are an apparent borrowing from Catullus.⁶ Mention of the inferiority of Spanish wines is also nothing new: Polybius in the second century B.C. records that a single drachma will buy a *metretes* (about 40 litres) of Spanish wine.⁷ Ovid says nothing of the Cantabrian war; his only historical reference to Spain concerns Brutus' Gallaecian campaign, back in the 130s B.C.⁸

Propertius' sole mention of Spain contrasts the colours of Scythian snow and Spanish vermilion (*minio...Hibero*). This mineral is indeed mentioned by an Augustan historian, since Trogus says that Gallaecia produces abundant *minium*.⁹ But the most famous vermilion mines, those at Sisapo in southern Spain, are already named (though without explicit mention of *minium*) in Republican literature.¹⁰ There is thus good reason to believe that Spanish vermilion was known at Rome before the Augustan age. Tibullus makes no reference to Spain, but the apocryphal poem 3,7 claims that *audax Hispania* would be no obstacle to the poet's heroic patron, Valerius Messalla.

Horace makes far more allusions to Spain than the other Augustan poets. Like Ovid, he refers to Geryon and to an event of past history, the Numantine war.¹¹ Like Cicero, he uses the toponym Gades (Cádiz) to symbolize remoteness, as we might use Timbuktu.¹² Several references are made to Spanish products omitted by the other poets. In *epod.* 4,3 Horace mentions Spanish ropes (*Hibericis...funibus*). Ropes were made from esparto grass, a speciality of Spain,¹³ though no one before Horace cites ropes in connection with Spain. Spanish armour (*loricis Hiberis*) is mentioned in *carm.* 1,29; the superiority of Spanish steel had long been recognized.¹⁴ Horace lists *garum*, a Spanish fish sauce, as part of the menu at the pretentious dinner-party of Nasidienus. Although salted fish from Spain was known as early as the fifth

⁴ Cic. *fam.* 10,31,1; Varro *rust.* 1,16,1-2; Sall. *hist.* 2,88-96.

⁵ Ovid *met.* 7,324; 9,184; 15,12; *fast.* 6,519.

⁶ *am.* 1,15,34; *met.* 2,251; *cf.* Catull. 29.

⁷ *ars* 3,646; Plb. 34,8.

⁸ *fast.* 6,462.

⁹ Prop. 2,3,11; Pomp. Trog. 44,3,4, probably without foundation (Trogus is using *minium* as an etymology for the river Minius, modern Minho).

¹⁰ Cic. *Phil.* 2,48; Str. 3,2,3 (presumably from Posidonius in the early first century B.C.)

¹¹ Hor. *carm.* 2,14; 2,12.

¹² *carm.* 2,2; 2,6; *cf.* Cic. *dom.* 30.

¹³ Varro *rust.* 1,23,6; Liv. 21,47,7; Pomp. Trog. 44,1,6.

¹⁴ Plb. fr. 179; D.S. 5,33,30-4 (probably from Posidonius).

century B.C., and the word *garum* is cited by Varro, Spanish *garum* as such is not explicitly mentioned until the Augustan period.¹⁵

However, Horace's greatest novelty is the incorporation of references to Augustus' war in Cantabria. He describes the Cantabrian foe as warlike (*bellicosus*) and formerly unsubduable (*non ante domabilis*), but now in chains.¹⁶ Credit for the victory is variously given to Augustus himself, and to his general Agrippa.¹⁷ Most original is Horace's mention of the Concani who delight in horses' blood (*laetum equino sanguine Concanum*). These blood-drinking Concani are otherwise cited only by Silius Italicus in the Flavian period; their existence is possibly corroborated by Ptolemy, who lists a town Concana in Cantabria.¹⁸ Horace's reference to the Concani apparently reflects new ethnographic knowledge acquired in the Cantabrian war.

To sum up. Although the Augustan poets had access to the latest information on Spain, they were highly inconsistent in their use of it. Vergil seems surprisingly ill-informed about Iberia, contenting himself with stock themes. Ovid and Propertius mention some of Spain's famed resources, though their information appears to come from Republican sources. Only Horace treats Spain in an innovative manner, making the first known references to Spanish *garum* and Spanish rope, and alluding repeatedly to Augustus' successful war in Cantabria.

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¹⁵ Hor. *Sat.* 2,8; cf. Eup. fr. 186 (from a play produced in 421 B.C.); Varro *ling.* 9,66; Str. 3,4,6.

¹⁶ *carm.* 2,11; 4,14; 3,8.

¹⁷ *carm.* 3,14; *epist.* 1,12.

¹⁸ *carm.* 3,4; Sil. 3,361; Ptol. *Geog.* 2,6,50.