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An Avenger in Pliny (NH 2.241 and 35.14)

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Abstract: A reconsideration of the two mentions of L. Marcius in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* leads to the conclusion that Valerius Antias' account of the Roman counter-offensive in Spain of 211 placed the emphasis on Marcius' revenge of the recent killings of P. and Cn. Cornelius Scipio.

Keywords: Pliny the Elder, Valerius Antias, Livy, L. Marcius, Scipiones.

The remarkable Lucius Marcius, who took the lead in the Roman counter-offensive in the Spanish campaign of 211 BCE, after the major defeat at the Upper Baetis, is mentioned twice in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder:

2.111.241

[reperitur apud auctores ...] quin et repentinus existere ignes et in aquis et in corporibus, etiam humanis: Trasimenum lacum arsisse totum; Seruio Tullio dormienti in pueritia ex capite flammarum emicuisse, L. Marcio in Hispania interemptis Scipionibus contionanti et milites ad ultionem exhortanti arsisse simili modo Valerius Antias narrat.

[It is found in earlier authors ...] and also that sudden fires flare up both on water and on bodies, even human ones: that the whole of the Trasimene Lake took fire; that during his childhood a flame sprang out of Servius Tullius' head, while he was asleep; Valerius Antias reports that in a similar fashion fire caught light on Lucius Marcius in Spain, after the assassination of the Scipiones, as he was addressing a gathering and was urging the soldiers to vengeance.

35.4.14

Poeni ex auro factitauere et clupeos et imagines secumque uexere. in castris certe captis talem Hasdrubalis inuenit Marcius, Scipionum in Hispania ulti, isque clupeus supra fores Capitolinae aedis usque ad incendium primum fuit.

The Carthaginians used to make both shields and portraits with gold, and carried these with them. At any rate Marcius, the avenger of the Scipiones in Spain, found one of this kind that belonged to Hasdrubal in a camp that he had captured, and this shield was kept over the gate of the Capitoline Temple until the first fire.

As H. Peter and J. Rich have pointed out, there is no good reason to think that Pliny is drawing all three episodes he mentions in 2.241 from Valerius Antias:¹ he is

* I am grateful to Antonio Pistellato and the *MH* reviewers for their comments on previous versions of this note.

¹ H. Peter, *Historicorum Romanorum reliquiae*, I (Leipzig ²1914) 248 (note on F 23: 'caue tamen etiam qui antecedunt infinitius pendere ab hoc narrat existimes miraculaque, quae exponuntur, fluxisse ex Antiate'); J. W. Rich in T. J. Cornell (ed.), *The Fragments of the Roman Historians*, II (Oxford 2013) 343 (no. 25, F27b).

relating stories that were related by a number of authors, and is singling out the account that Valerius Antias made of the portent involving Marcius.² His other mention of Marcius refers to the aftermath of the victory against Hasdrubal and the seizing of his shield, which was kept on the Capitol until the fire of 83 BCE. This story is also related in closely similar terms by Livy (25.39.12–17), who gives a brief summary of Marcius' achievements in Spain by referring to an impressive set of authorities: Claudius Quadrigarius, Valerius Antias, and Calpurnius Piso Frugi. His sources were in disagreement on the extent of the Carthaginian losses, while he records no disagreement among them on the historicity of the fire prodigy, nor on the existence of the shield on the Capitol; he also notes that the shield bore the portrait of Hasdrubal. Except for the figure he gave for the Carthaginian casualties, it is unclear how Valerius contributed to that tradition: Livy gives no indication of how he used his sources.³

His account of the story of Marcius is remarkable in several respects. Although the Carthaginians may fairly regard him as a *tumultuarius dux* (26.37.8), he brings a measure of order at a time of potentially catastrophic turmoil by taking up an extraordinary command with the endorsement of his soldiers; he operates beyond the established political and social framework, and yet he acts to prop it up decisively.⁴ He plays as prominent a role as the other Marcius who features earlier in the same book of *AUC* in which he is first mentioned: the author of *carmina* that came to light in 213 BCE, during an inspection ordered by the Senate, and were vetted by the praetors and the *decemviri s.f.* (25.12); the second *carmen* prompted the decision to celebrate new games in honour of Apollo, the *ludi Apollinares*.⁵ L. Marcius revives the Roman war effort in Spain in spite of his lack of official status; yet he also partakes in religious qualities that place him beyond the established framework of public religion. Pliny establishes an explicit analogy between the fire portent of Marcius and that of Servius Tullius, which might have

² S. Montero Herrero, “Lucio Marcio, *dux tumultuarius*, y el prodigo de 211 a.C. en Hispania”, in V. Revilla Calvo *et al.* (eds.), *Ex Baetica Romam. Homenaje a José Remesal Rodríguez*, Collecció Homenatges 58 (Barcelona 2020) 259–285, at 267–270 gives a full overview of the evidence. Marcius is almost certainly to be identified with the L. Marcius Septimus mentioned in Livy 32.2.5 (cf. 28.28.2): see D. S. Levene, *Livy on the Hannibalic War* (Oxford 2010) 73.

³ F. Münzer, *Beiträge zur Quellenkritik der Naturgeschichte des Plinius* (Berlin 1897) 200 argues that Livy drew the story of the portent and the shield from Valerius Antias, and that they were not mentioned in Claudius and Calpurnius; I do not see any way of establishing that. Cf. J. H. Richardson, “Valerius Antias and the Archives”, *MD* 80 (2018), 57–80 for a revisionist discussion of Valerius Antias’ working methods and Livy’s reliance on his work.

⁴ Cf. Livy 26.2.1–2 on the concerns in the Senate on his role in the running of the campaign. Livy does not record Marcius’ official position in the campaign: at 25.37.2 he merely refers to him as *eques Romanus*. Cicero states that he was a *primi pili centurio* (*Balb.* 34); for Valerius Maximus he was a *tribunus militum* (2.7.15). On the strategic and tactical aspects of Marcius’ campaign see G. Brusa, *Le coorti nell’esercito romano di età repubblicana*, Studi e testi di storia antica 26 (Pisa 2020) 84–90.

⁵ Cf. Montero Herrero, *loc. cit.* (n. 2) 276–277.

already been spelled out by Valerius Antias; he makes no reference, though, to the closely comparable tradition on Ascanius, whose head is suddenly surrounded by a glow of fire during the sack of Troy (Virg. *Aen.* 2.681–686).

Pliny read about the fire prodigy concerning Marcius and the conquest of Hasdrubal's shield in a number of annalistic sources, and indeed in Livy. Yet he decided to single out Valerius Antias as his authority on the fire portent. The clue for this choice may be yielded from the single detail that features in both his references to Marcius: the link between him and the revenge of the Scipiones.⁶ In 2.241 he mentions a contional speech in which Marcius urged his men to take revenge (*ad ultionem exhortanti*) for the deaths of Publius Cornelius Scipio and his brother Gnaeus; in 35.14 he merely labels him as 'the avenger of the Scipiones', *ultor Scipionum*. This emphasis is likely to have been a distinctive feature of Antias' version of the campaign. Livy does make reference to the theme of revenge on two occasions, albeit in negative terms, and in both instances reporting Marcius' own words: when he urges his men not to leave the death of their commanders unavenged (25.37.10: *ne inultos imperatores suos iacere sinerent*); and when, shortly afterwards, in a speech to the soldiers, he says that the Scipiones have been visiting him in his dreams, urging him to make sure that they, the Roman soldiers, and the *res publica* are not left unavenged (25.38.6: *neu se neu ... milites suos, commilitones uestros, neu rem publicam patiar inultam*). Yet Livy never comments on Marcius' role in accomplishing that revenge; Pliny's reference to Antias in 2.241 suggests that the annalist did.

Surely that is the aspect of Antias' account that caught Pliny's eye and coloured his references to Marcius at two very different stages of his work: first in a discussion of fire prodigies, then in an account of shields among the Carthaginians. Antias cast Marcius as the one who had carried out the rightful revenge of the death of the Scipiones: an assessment that undercut Scipio Africanus' achievement and his connection with the legacy of his father and uncle.⁷ We cannot tell in any detail how this theme was developed in Antias' work, but it is sufficiently clear that it did feature in it and that it was a distinctive strand of the tradition concerning the events of 211. Livy took quite a different line.

⁶ The question of the reason for Pliny's choice to single out Antias is raised by C. Smith, "Pliny the Elder and Archaic Rome", in E. Bispham/G. Rowe (eds.), *Vita Vigilia Est. Essays in Honour of Barbara Levick*, BICS Supplement 100 (London 2011) 147–170, at 151–153; the emphasis on revenge is aptly brought out by L. Cotta Ramosino, *Plinio il Vecchio e la tradizione storica di Roma nella Naturalis Historia*, *Studi di storia greca e romana* 9 (Alessandria 2004) 228.

⁷ Cf. Livy 26.20.3, who notes that Scipio's decision to take a tour of the troops and the allies in the company of Marcius, shortly after his arrival in Spain, rested on his confidence that no one could stand in the way of his *gloria* (on Marcius' *ueria gloria* see 25.39.16). Antias also took a negative view on Scipio's sexual conduct during the campaign, and was singled out by Gellius for that: see NA 7.8.6 (= FRHist 25 F29), with L. Beltramini, "Livy on Scipio Africanus. The Commander's Portrait at 26.19.3–9", *Classical Quarterly* 70 (2020) 230–246, at 237.

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