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Geo-politics in Silius' Libyan ekphrasis (*Punica* 1.193ff)

Silius Italicus' geographical ekphrasis on Libya (*Punica* 1.193-219) is dismissed as 'superfluous' by the commentator Spaltenstein. Arguing against this position, I seek to show the function of this ekphrasis within its wider narrative context. While the ekphrasis presents Libya as a land mass with clearly defined geographical boundaries, it is framed by a narrative in which Hannibal is extending the political influence of Libya beyond those boundaries. The ekphrasis thus sets up a tension between the notion of Libya *qua* landmass and Libya *qua* imperial power.

The first point to be discussed will be the problem of classifying Libya in relation to the rest of the world: it can be viewed either as 'a large offshoot of Asia' or as the 'third continent'. I shall argue that this ambiguity is far more than a geographical commonplace. At *Bellum Civile* 9.412-3, Lucan claims that Libya can be viewed as part of Europe. Although Silius does not mention this, his ekphrasis nevertheless stresses how close the two continents are to each other (*Punica* 1.198ff). The fact that Libya 'looks upon' (*uidet*) the lands of Europe is far from neutral: it is the gaze of an dangerous and acquisitive empire.

The second part of my discussion will focus on the phrase '*Herculeo dirimente freto*' (*Punica* 1.199). I shall argue that this alludes to Pomponius Mela 1.27 (*addit fama nominis fabulam, Herculeum ipsum iunctos perpetuo iugo diremisse colles*). The allusion encourages the reader to recall that Libya was joined to Europe before Hercules' intervention. Hannibal's incursion into Europe can be seen as an attempt to nullify the strait's status as a boundary between Libya and Europe.

In the final section of my argument, I will examine the tension between the Roman view of Libya as a continent with strict boundaries imposed on it by nature, and the expanded Libya which Hannibal threatens to create by invading Italy. According to the ekphrasis, the Atlas mountain range stops Libya from carrying its name any further (. Hannibal will later make a mockery of these stipulations by setting Libya on the Alps (*Punica* 3.563-4).