

I Sing of Things That Are Not Unknown'
Epic and History in Byzantine Africa

The first appearance of North Africa in Corippus' *Iohannis* is horrifying. John Troglita, the hero and protagonist of this epic, has been despatched from Constantinople by the emperor Justinian to relieve a beleaguered region. Storms, demonic visions and memories of the great conflicts of the past have marked his journey across the Mediterranean, before the African coast finally comes into view:

At last the commander looked out at the shores of the burning land, and recognised there the reins of untameable Mars: nor was the portent in any doubt, for the flames bore witness to the truth. The winds raised spirals of flame that curled at their peaks, and the ashes, mixed with smoke flying beyond the stars, scattered tiny sparks into the highest heavens. Now the fire surged into the middle of the sky, engulfing every tree in the burning land. The ripe crops burned in the cultivated fields, and every tree strengthened the fire that fed on its branches until they crumbled, consumed, into ashes. The wretched cities fell, as their citizens were slaughtered and, with their roofs swept away, all the walls were engulfed in flames.¹

This striking image of a war-torn land would have evoked a range of responses in both John Troglita and the audience of his poem. John himself – who was a historical figure as well as an epic hero – had been to North Africa before, in rather different circumstances.² In 533, some thirteen years before the action described in the *Iohannis*, he had taken part in the conquest of Vandal North

¹ *Ioh* I.323–35: *prospexit tandem succensae litora terrae | ductor et indomitas Martis cognouit habenas | nec dubium (nam uera ferunt incendia) monstrum: | uoluebant uenti crispantes uertice flammis | et fumo commista uolans super astra fauilla | scintillas tenues summam spargebat in aethram. | surgit et in medium feruet iam flamma profundum, | omnia conuoluens succensae robora terrae. | uritur alma seges cultos matura per agros, | omnis et augetur crescentem frondibus ignem | arbor et in cineres sese consumpta resoluit. | uertuntur miserae caesis cum ciuibus urbes | cunctaque direptis conflagent moenia tectis.*

² *PLRE* IIIA Ioannes 36 surveys his biography with the relevant sources. *Jord. Rom* 385 is the only attestation of the cognomen Troglita, which may indicate an origin in Trogilos in Macedonia. See *Proc. BV* I.11.6–10 (who implies that he came from Thrace and distinguishes him as 'brother of Pappos'), *Partsch* (1879), xxv and *Riedlberger* (2010b), 257.

Africa under the great imperial commander Belisarius. This campaign had steamrolled the Vandal kingdom of Carthage in a matter of weeks and integrated the rich provinces of Africa Proconsularis, Byzacium, Numidia and Tripolitania into Justinian's eastern empire.³ The victory provided the springboard for the invasion first of Sardinia and Sicily, and then of mainland Italy and southern Spain in the years that followed.⁴ John would have looked back on this earlier campaign with mixed feelings. His brother Pappus had been killed during the initial stages of the expedition, and grief at this loss surfaces at a later moment in the poem, but John had also won glory in the fighting.⁵ He held an important military position in the government of the region and was subsequently posted to a senior command on the eastern front in the ongoing war with Sassanid Persia.⁶ When John returned to North Africa at the head of a new expedition, then, it was to a territory that he knew quite well.

The same image of a burning African landscape would have meant something rather different to an educated reader (or listener) of the *Iohannis*. For such an audience, the idea of a hero landing on the African coast after a difficult Mediterranean crossing would inevitably recall the arrival of Aeneas and his refugee Trojans on the coast of Carthage at the beginning of Virgil's great *Aeneid*.⁷ The vivid description of Africa in grief – of sparks from a funereal flame creeping towards the sky and a hero lost in personal lamentation – added another layer which recalled the same hero's departure from Carthage. At the end of *Aeneid* IV, the shunned Queen Dido casts herself onto a burning pyre when she hears that her lover has departed for Italy; in the opening lines of the following book, we find Aeneas 'looking back at the walls lit up by flames' from the deck of his ship before he turns back to Italy and his destiny.⁸ In Roman tradition, Dido's great sacrifice set in chain the events that led to the Punic wars between Rome and Carthage which determined the destiny of the Mediterranean world. In presenting John's landing in the way that he does, Corippus succinctly links his hero to Aeneas, his poem to the *Aeneid*, and the conflict that he narrates to the seismic struggles of antiquity.

³ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the occupation. ⁴ Evans (1996), 126–82, provides an overview.

⁵ *Ioh* I.390–404. His position as a provincial *dux* is implied in *Ioh* I.469–72.

⁶ *Proc.* *BP* II.14.12 and *Ioh* I.52–109.

⁷ *Virg. Aen* I.157–79. The degree to which audiences could pick up literary inter-texts (especially when a poem was delivered verbally) has been much debated. See Schindler (2009), 53–5, for a thoughtful case that a privileged proportion would certainly have recognized many of them (and enjoyed the erudite game). Schubert (2019) is an important recent treatment of the same issue with Dracontius' poetry.

⁸ *Virg. Aen* IV.663–705; V.3–4 *moenia respiciens, . . . conluent flammis*. Vinchesi (1983), 131–2, also notes the linguistic echo here of *Aen* XII.672 (which may have been less obvious to his audience).

John's bleak panorama would perhaps have had the greatest effect on the very earliest audience of the *Iohannis*. Corippus was a North African, and he most certainly composed the work for an audience in Carthage in the immediate aftermath of John's campaign, probably in 549 or 550. The poet repeatedly alludes to the triumphal procession granted to the general and places his epic within the general celebratory atmosphere of that time, but the sufferings of the earlier period still lingered in the memory.⁹ The prologue suggests that the work was intended to be recited in public, although it is possible that this performance was limited to the opening book, which is the most obviously panegyric in tone.¹⁰ Whatever form this took, for those Carthaginians who heard his poem in the hours of its first performance, this burning African landscape was not simply a stage for heroic action nor an abstracted epic setting, but evocation of a real world that they could remember all too well. John's landing had taken place just four or five years before, in the late summer of 546. The general had come into a region which had been battered repeatedly by frontier wars, military mutinies, civil conflict and administrative incompetence in the years that followed Belisarius' first landing; it had been struck by a plague in 543 and had probably suffered further from a succession of poor harvests in the following years.¹¹ Even the Church could offer only limited solace: although African Catholic clerics had warmly welcomed the imperial conquest of 533/4, the collision of Greek and Latin orthodoxies over the next decade led to bitter disputes which were to continue for the rest of Justinian's reign, and which threatened the proud theological independence of Carthage and the surrounding regions.¹² Against this grim setting, John's military victories stood out even more starkly. They offered a respite from a succession of ills and promised brighter days ahead, but the upheaval that had come before was not easily forgotten.

The *Iohannis* is an extraordinary historical resource. In a little under 5,000 lines, Corippus records the military campaigns John Troglita undertook against hostile 'Moorish' or 'Berber' groups between 546 and 548. This fighting stretched across the imperial provinces of Byzacium and Tripolitania – now southern Tunisia and north-western Libya – and John was ultimately victorious, but few observers outside the region seem

⁹ *Iob* Proem and L1–7. Riedlberger (2010), 83–9, is the most convincing discussion of the circumstances of delivery. The triumphal themes in the poem are discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁰ Hofmann (1989), 373, n. 7 and (2015), 109.

¹¹ These events – and Corippus' account of them – are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

¹² See Chapter 6.

to have taken much notice. The Greek historian Procopius, for example, whose text is very full on earlier episodes of North African history, mentions John's campaigns only in passing and implies that they were of little significance to the balance of power in the region; our other literary sources, including most contemporary chronicles, simply omit the victories entirely from their accounts.¹³ Even modern discussions of the Byzantine army rarely linger for long on these brush wars in a forgotten corner of the empire, but the *Iohannis* elevates them to a heroic scale.¹⁴ To do this, Corippus revived the genre of Latin 'historical' epic – a literary form which had been moribund for more than 400 years – and made the daring move of presenting very recent events in the bold colours traditionally reserved for mythic events or the battles of the distant past. Yet even as he presented John and his imperial troopers as the new *Aeneadae* – the sons of Aeneas – Corippus reflected on the uneasy state of the African provinces that they had come to save and which he and his audience recalled all too well.¹⁵ His poem sings of 'battle standards, commanders and fierce barbarians', but also examines the unhappy months and years which had preceded John's arrival and which are known in only fragmentary form in our other sources. Conspicuously, Corippus is frequently ambivalent in his treatment of the recent past, in which his own lived experiences in a war-torn province run contrary to any seamless message of imperial success which the authorities in the imperial capital might have preferred. Yet there is celebration here too, and it is the reconciliation of these disparate themes in an archaic literary form that makes the *Iohannis* such a thrilling and challenging text to study.

The present book is an exploration of Corippus' *Iohannis* in all of its complexity. It is also a study of the early years of Byzantine Africa and the place of Latin poetry – and specifically Latin *epic* – within that world. As the multilayered story of John's landing reveals, this is a text that must be considered from a range of different perspectives simultaneously: it is at once a work of history, of literature and of social memory. All of these aspects were interdependent, and together they can reveal a great deal about the febrile political and social world of mid-sixth-century Carthage.

¹³ Proc. *BVII*.28.46–52 outlines the campaigns and suggests that peace was won at high cost. Jord. *Rom* 388 is more positive (but even briefer). On Procopius, see especially Cameron (1985); Brodka (2004), 14–151; Kaldellis (2004) (and his discussion of the *Vandal War* in Kaldellis (2016)). Greatrex (2014a) provides a survey, and see now the collected papers in Meier and Montinaro (2022).

¹⁴ See most recently Whitby (2021), 198–200; Heather (2018), 250–1. The otherwise excellent study of Koehn (2018) only uses Corippus to discuss the adoption of throwing spears by the imperial cavalry at pages 133–7.

¹⁵ *Ioh* I.8.

Importantly, the long narrative of the *Iohannis* is filled with valuable detail on the changing military fortunes of the region, its political convulsions and the complex social world within which John and his contemporaries acted. This was a messy business – of wars of conquest, internal political squabbles and corruption – but the poem illustrates unusually well the shifting political environment within which Corippus and his audience lived. If Corippus' *Iohannis* was written in part to celebrate imperial military victory (and it certainly was), it remained the work of an African author who remembered all too well the difficulties of the earlier period and the suffering that government incompetence had caused. The *Iohannis* is also our single most important textual source on Moorish North Africa – on the groups against whom John fought, and (no less importantly) those who were crucial allies in his campaigns. The epic preserves names of individuals and groups, hints at social, political and religious practices across the African frontier regions, and on occasion attempts to contemplate the unfolding chaos from the perspective of the Moors themselves. That it does all of this in epic verse adds to the difficulty of the historian's task, but reveals a great deal. Corippus' choice to present his long battle sequences in the stylized form of Homeric or Virgilian warfare mitigates his value as a source on the events that unfolded on the battlefield, but still tells us a great deal about the conception of this recent war in the imagination of contemporary Carthage. Similarly, while modern historians may fume at the ease with which Corippus switches between seemingly trustworthy sources on the Moorish world and the archaic ethnographic language of earlier epic, this too is profoundly revealing about Carthaginian attitudes to 'peripheral' groups. The form of the *Iohannis* – quite as much as its content – will be central to our investigation.

Corippus: Poet and Poem

The author of the *Iohannis* is an elusive figure, and little is known of him beyond the few clues we can gain from his extant works. His full name is conventionally rendered as Flavius Cresconius Corippus on the strength of one (now lost) manuscript, but even this is less secure than we might wish. Peter Riedlberger has noted that 'Gorippus' is probably a more accurate reading of this manuscript, but the more familiar name will be preferred here if only to defer to convention (and avoid confusion).¹⁶ He was certainly North African in origin: he is identified as an *africanus*

¹⁶ Riedlberger (2010), 28–33, and Riedlberger (2015).

grammaticus (upper-level school teacher) in a medieval catalogue, and identifies with the region throughout his work.¹⁷ In the proem to the *Iohannis*, he directly addresses the prominent men (*proceres*) of Carthage, and he dwells at length on the sufferings of Africans in the bleak years before John's arrival.¹⁸ In the same passage, he presents himself as a rustic poet ill suited to such a grand setting, having 'previously recited my songs in the countryside', but this is more likely to have been a modesty topos – or a Virgilian affectation – than a confession of rural origins.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Corippus seems familiar with the landscape of the provincial hinterland, and it has been suggested that his detailed descriptions of the city of Iunci in Byzacium hint that he came from there, but this remains speculative.²⁰ All that can be said with confidence is that the *Iohannis* was written in Carthage in the very late 540s or early 550s, and that the poet enjoyed some connections with the movers and shakers within that city.

As an African, Corippus was one of the last products of a great flourishing of Latin learning in the western empire. Two generations before him, Blossius Aemilius Dracontius had composed a range of Christian and secular poetry in Vandal Carthage, but had been imprisoned for his troubles.²¹ Other poets had also blossomed in and around the Vandal court from the middle of the fifth century, writing panegyrics, dedicatory poetry, epigrams and shorter works, many of which have been preserved in a compilation of the early Byzantine period known as the *Latin Anthology*.²² The imperial authorities well recognized the value of this cultural tradition at the time of the occupation. In spring 534, Justinian established stipends for two *grammatici* and two rhetors to be kept on the provincial staff, and many other men of letters found professional opportunities in the newly imperial territories.²³ Corippus' contemporaries included the Christian poet Verecundus of Iunci (who makes a cameo appearance in the *Iohannis*), a generation of prolific theologians and innumerable jobbing poets who cheerfully celebrated imperial building projects across the region in Latin

¹⁷ Compare for example *Laus* I.18–21; Kaster (1988), 261–3; Tommasi Moreschini (2009a), 94–5.

¹⁸ *Ioh* Proem 1.

¹⁹ *Ioh* Proem 25–6: *quondam per rura locutus . . . carmina*. Virgil's 'progression' from the pastoral *Eclagues* through the *Georgics* to the *Aeneid* is a likely point of reference here.

²⁰ Cameron (1982), 20; Blaudeau (2015), 125; compare Lassère (1984).

²¹ Wolff (2015) is a clear introduction. Pohl (2019) is an excellent compilation of recent work on the poet with a full bibliography.

²² The nature of relations between the African poets and the Vandal kings has been much debated. Compare Chalon and colleagues (1985); Clover (1986); George (2004); Miles (2005); Vössing (2019); Wolff (2019).

²³ *CJ* I.27.1.42.

doggerel.²⁴ But Corippus was perhaps the most successful of this generation. The performance of the *Iohannis* brought him to the attention of a new circle of patrons, including John and the dignitaries of the eastern capital. We have no details of his next movements, but within fifteen years, the poet had made his way to Constantinople, where he composed and performed at least two other works, both of which have survived.²⁵ The shorter is the preface to a panegyric to Anastasius, who held office as both Quaestor of the Sacred Palace and Master of Offices in the imperial capital. The praise poem which these verses introduced has since been lost, but it is likely that Corippus composed similar works for other patrons.²⁶ His only other extant work is the *In Laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, a formal celebration of the new emperor Justin II in four books, written to honour his accession in 566.²⁷ Both Constantinopolitan poems allude to Africa, and perhaps hint at the status Latin writers from that region enjoyed in Greek-speaking Constantinople.²⁸ Corippus has also been plausibly connected with the ‘Cresconius’ who wrote a number of poems on explicitly religious subjects which were held in the early medieval monastic library at Lorsch, but which have not survived.²⁹

The mysteries of Corippus’ life pale in comparison to the challenges posed by the *Iohannis* itself. Almost every aspect of the epic poses scholarly problems, from the transmission of the text to its density of literary allusions, which work like a funhouse mirror of the Latin poetic tradition. The full text survives today in just one manuscript, Trivultianus 686: this was a copy made by the Arezzo poet Giovanni De Bonis in the late fourteenth century and rediscovered in 1814 in the library of the Trivulzio family just outside Milan.³⁰ De Bonis was somewhat slapdash in his transmission, but was evidently sufficiently inspired by his African forebear to infuse several of his own compositions with Corippian imagery.³¹ A second copy of the poem was identified in the Korvin library in Buda in the early sixteenth century by Giovanni Cuspiniano, who copied down the incipit and the first five lines of

²⁴ Hays (2016) paints a vivid portrait of these writers.

²⁵ Baldwin (1978), Cameron (1980) and Hofmann (2015) provide contrasting reconstructions of Corippus’ life. Compare also Kaster (1988), 261–3.

²⁶ Corippus, *Pan Anast.* Cameron (1976).

²⁷ Corippus, *Iust.* Cameron (1976); Antes (1981). Stache (1976) is the standard commentary.

²⁸ Compare for example *Pan Anast.* 36–40; *Iust.* Pref 35–6; I.18–20; IV.215–16. On the status of North African Latinists in Justinian’s empire (which was not always positive), see Merrills (2022b), 393–4 (with references).

²⁹ Hofmann (1989) is the best discussion.

³⁰ Lo Conte (2012) discusses the circumstances of discovery and early publication. This is a useful survey of the different manuscript traditions.

³¹ Tommasi Moreschini (2015).

Book I. This is the only manuscript which gives the poet's full name, but it is now lost.³² Around twenty lines from the *Iohannis* have also been identified in another manuscript of the fourteenth century, the so-called Florilegium Veronense, and were edited by Gustav Lowe in 1879.³³ Two library catalogues from the monastery at Monte Cassino record a copy of the poem among their holdings in the eleventh century, which was still there in the fifteenth, but this too has since been lost. The text preserved by De Bonis is just under 4,700 lines in total, but includes several significant lacunae of unknown length, which include the final lines of the poem. Although the eventual resolution of John's campaign is never in doubt (the opening lines of the poem identify what follows as *victoris . . . festa carmina* – 'festive songs of victory' – and the reader is repeatedly reminded of the coming success, as we shall see), the final section of the *Iohannis* is missing from Trivultianus 686 and it is not completely clear where the narrative ended. It is likely that the poem closed with John's final victory of 548, but it may have extended to include the celebration of his triumph.³⁴ Manuscript traditions variously identify the work as the *Iohannis* ('Poem of John' or 'Johniad'), or the *De Bellis Libycis* ('On the African War') and state that it was seven or eight books in length. Scholars concur that eight books is the correct length, although they have not always agreed on the exact division.³⁵ These (many) problems aside, we can at least be confident that the bulk of Corippus' epic has survived, albeit in a form that continues to pose challenges for scholars.

Editorial work on the *Iohannis* has been extensive since the rediscovery of De Bonis' text at the start of the nineteenth century. Pietro Mazzucchelli first identified the work and published it, and his edition was adapted by Immanuel Bekker for the *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*.³⁶ Further editions were produced in the last decades of the nineteenth century by Joseph Partsch (for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*) and Michael Petschenig, both of whom drew extensively on the work of their predecessors.³⁷ In 1970, James Diggle and F. R. D. Goodyear produced a collaborative edition of the text for Cambridge University Press,

³² Lo Conte (2012), 310. ³³ Lowe (1879). ³⁴ This is discussed further in Chapter 3.

³⁵ This is clearest in the case of the end of Book IV and the start of Book V. Caramico and Riedlberger (2010) convincingly argue that IV.597 in Diggle and Goodyear's edition should be the opening line of Book V. This is also followed by Goldlust (2017). For the numbering used in the present study (which follows Diggle and Goodyear for convenience), see the remarks in the prolegomena.

³⁶ Mazzucchelli (1820); Bekker (1836). On these editions, see especially Lo Conte (2012), 301–34.

³⁷ Partsch (1879); Petschenig (1886).

which has since provided the basis for translations of the poem into Spanish, French and English.³⁸ Editorial work continues: editions, translations and commentaries on individual books have been systematically published, including those by Maria Assunta Vinchesi (Book I: in Italian), Vincent Zarini (Book II: French), Chiara Tommasi Moreschini (Book III: Italian), Benjamin Goldlust (Book IV: French) and Peter Riedlberger (Book VIII: German).³⁹ The depth of this scholarship testifies to the complexity of the editorial problems posed by Corippus, not least as he is known to us through the distorting lens of De Bonis, and the publication of each new edition has typically thrown up a cloud of additional smaller publications, comments and amendments. Editors have particularly wrestled with Corippus' treatment of unusual toponyms and ethnonyms, few of which fit easily within Latin hexameters as the poet confessed, and many of which are unique to the poem.⁴⁰ Corippus' Latin is also a challenge: although the poet was evidently deeply immersed in Virgil and saw himself as the true heir to the earlier tradition, scholars have differed over the degree to which his idiosyncrasies should be 'corrected' to reflect this sensibility.⁴¹ Heroic editorial work over the past two centuries has done a great deal to place study of Corippus on firm foundations, but treacherous areas remain, particularly for the unwary.⁴²

Epic Background

In composing a historical epic, Corippus was the conscious heir to a long tradition of Greek and Latin writing. The *Iohannis* was a poem which told of 'the deeds of kings and leaders and the sorrows of war' in the famous formulation of Horace, and did so to the martial beat of the Latin

³⁸ Diggle and Goodyear (1970). Shea (1998) (English); Ramírez Tirado (1997) (Spanish); Dideren (2007) (French).

³⁹ Vinchesi (1983); Zarini (1997); Tommasi Moreschini (2001a); Goldlust (2017); Riedlberger (2010). All include fine introductions to the poem as a whole. I have been unable to access Giulia Caramico's recent edition of Book V.

⁴⁰ Corippus confesses these difficulties at *Ioh* II.25–7. See especially Skutsch (1900), Partsch (1896) and the discussion in Chapter 4.

⁴¹ Compare for example the reviews of Diggle and Goodyear's edition by Hudson-Williams (1972) and especially Willis (1973) at 214: 'a good Latinist is in constant danger of correcting the text as if it were a student's copy of verses; he can often make a verse better without much difficulty, but he may not thereby bring it nearer to what the author intended'.

⁴² Here I should stress again my gratitude to Aaron Pelttari and Paul Roche for their help making sense of Corippus' (sometimes fearsome) Latin.

hexameter.⁴³ Epic was also defined by the long shadows cast by its earliest and greatest proponents – Homer in the Greek tradition and Virgil in the Latin. In the preface to the *Iohannis*, Corippus signals his deference to both mighty forebears:

The bard of Smyrna described strong Achilles in song, as did the learned Virgil Aeneas. John's achievement taught me to describe his battles and report his deeds for those yet to come. John surpasses Aeneas in valour, but my song is unworthy of Virgil.⁴⁴

Corippus tips his cap to Homer (*Smyrnaeus vates*) here, and he may well have known that text in Greek, but it is the *Aeneid* that provides the principal model for the *Iohannis*, and the Trojan hero who is the archetype for the general John.⁴⁵ The point is driven home in the opening lines of Book I, which directly evoke Virgil's famous 'I sing of arms and the man' (*arma virumque cano*), at the start of his own poem. These lines present the epic that follows as an almost involuntary response to John's heroism and the urging of the muses:

I sing about banners and leaders, fierce peoples and the destruction of war, about the betrayal and slaughter of men, and their hard labours; about disasters in Libya and of enemies broken by might, of the hunger men had to endure and of the waters denied, thirst which confused both armies with deadly tumult; I sing of peoples confused, laid low and subjugated, and of a leader who sealed these deeds with a great triumph.⁴⁶

This deference to Virgil was no simple affectation in the literary world of late antique Africa. Whether or not he was a teacher, Corippus would have been intimately familiar with the works of the poet from his own days in the schoolroom, and this would have been shared by much of his audience. A century and a half earlier, the adventures of Aeneas had such a profound

⁴³ Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 73–4: *Res gestae regumque ducumque et tristia bella quo scribi possent numero, monstravit Homerus.*

⁴⁴ *Ioh*, Proem. 11–16: *Smyrnaeus vates fortem descripsit Achillem, | Aeneam doctus carmine Vergilius: | meque Iohannis opus docuit describere pugnas | cunctaque uenturis acta referre uiris. | Aeneam superat melior uirtute Iohannes, | sed non Vergilio carmina digna cano.* Compare Virg. *Ec.* IV.3, VIII.9–10; IX.35–6 on the 'worthiness' of performing works in the aftermath of others, and Stat. *Theb.* XII.816–19 for a similar conceit. I am grateful to Paul Roche for these observations.

⁴⁵ Pace the remarkable observation of Nissen (1940), 298, that Corippus was an essentially Greek poet, and 'only Latin in language' (*der nur in der Sprache lateinisch sei*). Antès (1981), XXXIII–V, n. 3 discusses the evidence for Corippus' knowledge of Greek.

⁴⁶ *Ioh* I.1–8: *signa duces gentesque feras Martisque ruinas, | insidias stragesque uirum durosque labores | et Libycas clades ac fractos uiribus hostes | indictamque famem populis laticesque negatos, | utraque letifero turbantes castra tumultu, | turbatos, stratosque cano populosque subactos, | ductorem et magno signantem facta triumpho[.]*

effect on the young Augustine that his own *Confessions* is unmistakably shaped by the narrative of the Trojan wanderer in search of his true homeland, and generations of educated Latin speakers had similarly come to see the world through the filters Virgil provided.⁴⁷ Many late antique poets worked still more directly with the poet, even composing original poems ('Virgilian centos') consisting entirely of lines and phrases drawn from his work and repurposed to new poetic ends.⁴⁸ Virgilian verses were endlessly sampled and repurposed in everything from occasional graffiti to Christian sermons. These tags might have been intended to display a writer's erudition, or provoke a frisson of recognition within the audience, but might also reflect his foundational role in the development of Latin as a language, just as Shakespeare and the King James Bible do in modern written English (or as *The Simpsons* and internet memes do in everyday speech). For Corippus and writers of his tradition, Virgil provided both a framework for comprehending the world and the language to make sense of it.

Corippus used Virgilian elements to magnify the accomplishments of his hero John as well as his own poetic status. Nor was he above spelling out these allusions for his audience. Close evocations of Virgilian scenes are quite common in the poem, as we have already seen in the description of John's first glimpse of the African landscape. Elsewhere, these connections are made even more explicitly. As John's fleet sails past the site of Troy on its voyage from Constantinople to Carthage, for example, the crews aboard ship reflect at length on the marvellous battles fought on the site, but it is left to John's son Peter to articulate the precise connection between the poetic past and the heroic present, and his own place within this genealogy:

The illustrious Peter heard them talking of battles. When he heard the brilliant name of the boy Iulus, he burned in his boyish heart with an new desire to read, wishing to know about those wars. He was stirred by great piety: he thought of himself as Ascanius [and] his mother as Creusa: she was a king's daughter, his mother too was a king's daughter. Aeneas was Ascanius' father, and his father was now the famous John.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Aug. *Conf.*, I.13–14 and *De Civ. Dei.* XVIII.16. Hardie (2019) is a gripping treatment of Virgil's influence in late antiquity. MacCormack (1998) is essential on Virgil's influence on Augustine, and 1–49 is a clear introduction of the poet's importance in the later period. See especially 89–90 and 96–7 on the Virgilian structure of *Confessions*. Wills (2010) is also a helpful overview.

⁴⁸ McGill (2005); Pelttari (2014), 73–114.

⁴⁹ *Ioh.* I. 197–203: *audii egregius narrantes proelia Petrus. | audii ut pueri praeclarum nomen Iuli, | arsit amore nouo pectus puerile legendi, | noscere bella uolens. magna pietate mouetur: | se putat Ascanium, matrem putat esse Creusam. | filia regis erat: mater quoque filia regis. | tunc pater Aeneas, et nunc pater ipse Iohannes.*

By advertising his debts to Virgil at the outset of his poem, Corippus reveals the foundations of his own epic clearly. Like the *Aeneid*, the *Iohannis* is a poem about a hero at war, but in both poems much of the fighting is concentrated in the second half of the epic. The opening books of each trace the voyage of the hero across the Mediterranean and describe the origins of the focal conflict. The second and third books of the *Aeneid* are devoted to a long analepsis (a narrative 'flashback'), as Aeneas retells the story of the fall of Troy to a horrified audience at the court of Dido; likewise, the third and fourth books of *Iohannis* are dominated by a similar digression which recalls the 'fall' of North Africa in the voice of one of its participants.⁵⁰ Virgilian themes and motifs are readily apparent on other levels of composition too, from the metaphors which describe the setting of the sun on a bloody battlefield to the epithets which distinguish John and his lieutenants.⁵¹ In telling the story of John, Corippus was also retelling one of the most familiar narratives of the Roman world and reliving it anew.

Virgil was the most important of Corippus' literary models, of course, but was not his only source of inspiration. In the century after Virgil, a succession of Latin epicists had produced their own variations on this theme, and Corippus knew these works well, lifting scenes, phrases and moments of mood from writers like Ovid, Statius, Silius Italicus and (especially) the Neronian poet Lucan.⁵² Each of these writers responded in different ways to the precedents set by Homer, Virgil and the poets who came after them, but this collective process gradually established the boundaries of the genre – what a Latin epic 'should' include.⁵³ Many of these elements are clearly apparent in the *Iohannis* and are constitutive features of its narrative. When Corippus described the sea storm which nearly wrecked John's fleet in Book I, for example, he did so using language derived from the archetypal passage in *Aeneid* V, but also from the countless tempests that had risen in later Latin epics.⁵⁴ We do not know whether John's fleet actually encountered such a storm during the crossing, but Corippus' retelling of his story as an epic

⁵⁰ See Chapter 3.

⁵¹ Blänsdorf (1975) and Lausberg (1989) are essential. Compare Alan Cameron (1967). Tommasi Moreschini (2013a) provides a clear overview.

⁵² Corippus' debts to the poetic tradition are widely noted in Mazzucchelli (1820) *passim* and Amann (1885), as well as the modern commentaries of Vinchesi (1980), Zarini (1997), Tommasi Moreschini (2001a), Goldlust (2017) and Riedlberger (2010). On the particular influence of Silius, see especially Delattre (2011).

⁵³ Hardie (1993) is a vivid introduction to this tradition.

⁵⁴ *Iob* I.271–322; Vinchesi (1983), 126–31, identifies key classical echoes. Lausberg (1989), 117–18, and Bureau (2015), 227, discuss the significance of storm passages in Juvencus, II.37–42 and Sedulius, *Carm Pasch.* III.62.

demanded it. A similar impulse is apparent in the description of two visits to African oracles by Moorish leaders in Books III and VI of the *Iohannis*.⁵⁵ As we shall see, these passages are important sources for studying Moorish paganism in this period (or at least for studying Byzantine attitudes towards Moorish paganism), but they too are indelibly shaped by the epic tradition within which Corippus wrote. The likely inspiration behind both is Aeneas' visit to the Sibylline oracle in *Aeneid* VI, but the language that Corippus uses and the position of each episode in the narrative reveal other debts, most obviously to the visitation of Hasdrubal to the oracle at the start of Silius Italicus' *Punica*, and the bloody prophetic scenes of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*.⁵⁶

Viewed in purely literary terms, the *Iohannis* is a tantalizing puzzle which has prompted scholarly work from a range of different perspectives. As a text that has variously been celebrated as 'the last Latin classical epic', or as a crucial bridge between classical poetry and the *chansons de geste* of the medieval period, the *Iohannis* has provided particularly rich pickings.⁵⁷ Built as it is from the *spolia* of the classical canon, the text has variously been viewed as the construction of a creative and original architect, a thoughtless imitator barely in control of his material and a canny operative who rapidly composed his epic through the assembly of prefabricated parts.⁵⁸ Scholars have examined Corippus' use of specific passages from a range of models, but also the degree to which poetic precedent shaped whole sections of the poem. Studies have scrutinized Corippus' catalogues, oracle scenes, metaphors and (less frequently) battle sequences against this background and consider these texts as the latest in a long chain of Latin epic. As such, they reveal a great deal about Corippus' own education and poetic methodologies, and about late antique learning more generally.

Epic-Panegyric: A New Form?

Corippus often deviated from the models set by earlier epicists, not least because he composed his poem in the middle of the sixth century, when the political – and poetic – environment had changed significantly. While the

⁵⁵ *Ioh* III.81–151; VI.145–87.

⁵⁶ Zarini (1996). These passages, their literary antecedents and their value for understanding Moorish religious practices are discussed further in Chapter 6.

⁵⁷ See for example Manitius (1891), 407–8: 'the last representative of the ancient way in the south, at a time when the north had long since run wild' (*letzter Vertreter der antiken Richtung im Süden zu einer Zeit, als im Norden schon längst die Verwilderung eingetreten war*). And compare Romano (1966–7); Schindler (2009), 10; Zarini (2006), 60; Zarini (2010), 101–3.

⁵⁸ See (as a representative selection): Zarini (2003) (a skilful combination of panegyric and epic); Willis (1973), 213 ('the poet is a miserable hack'); Riedlberger (2010) (composed from carefully chosen *spolia*).

Aeneid and its successors remained central in the educational curricula of the late antique world, Corippus was virtually unique in seeking to compose an extended historical epic of his own, certainly in Latin. In Greek, a secular mythological tradition continued – Quintus of Smyrna continued the *Iliad* in fourteen books, Nonnus of Panopolis created a mythological cycle comparable in scale to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Pisander of Laranda celebrated Alexander the Great in sixty books – but there was little comparable in the Latin world.⁵⁹ Instead, western epicists were primarily inspired by explicitly Christian themes. Juvenius, Sedulius, Avitus and Arator rendered Scripture into formal epic metre, while other poets like Prudentius or Paulinus of Périgueux celebrated the martyrs and confessors of the early church in similarly grand language. This represented nothing less than the invention of a new poetic genre.⁶⁰ Where secular epic themes did survive in Latin, this was often in shorter *epyllia* – miniature epics – like those of Dracontius in the late fifth century, which crafted mythological motifs or canonical characters in much smaller settings.⁶¹

Other poets turned the epic tradition to explicitly political ends and coupled the language and imagery of Homer and Virgil with the conventions of panegyric praise poetry. In itself, this did not represent a great leap: after all, short *encomia* of ruling emperors were relatively common in earlier epics.⁶² While modern scholars have become increasingly sensitive to the subversive political subtext of the *Aeneid* or Lucan's *Civil War*, late antique readers rarely seem so troubled and readily drew upon these texts, especially when praising the powerful figures of their own day.⁶³ In Greek, this deployment of epic seems to have been relatively widespread, although few such works have survived in full. We know, for example, that Eusebius Scholasticus celebrated the battlefield victories of the general Gainas in verse in the late fourth century, but the poem has been entirely lost.⁶⁴ An anonymous poet of around the same time composed a *Blemyomachia* in

⁵⁹ Whitby and Roberts (2018), 222–5; Miguélez-Cavero (2008), 15–25, for background. Schindler (2009), 31–3 discusses some fragmentary works of the fourth and fifth century.

⁶⁰ On this see especially Herzog (1975); Roberts (1985); Green (2006). Hofmann (1987), 213, observes that Corippus' lost works may have included poems of this kind.

⁶¹ On which see Bright (1987) and the studies in Katharina Pohl (2019).

⁶² Schindler (2009), 28–9. See for example Virg. *Geo.* I.24–42; *Aen.* VI.791–805; Luc. *BCI.*33–66; Stat. *Theb.* I.16–33; Val Flacc. *Argonautica*, I.7–21. On the fluid boundaries of panegyric as a genre, see Hägg and Rousseau (2000).

⁶³ Discussed in Rees (2004), 38–44; Ware (2012), 27–30; Ware (2017); Hardie (2019), 75–102. Hardie (1986) is the classic treatment of Virgil's political cosmology.

⁶⁴ Soc Schol. *HE* III.21 and VI.6. and see Cameron and Long (1993), 200–1.

praise of one Germanus' successes against the Blemmyes in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, which survives only in a number of tantalizing fragments.⁶⁵ John Lydus also claimed to have written an epic in honour of Justinian's victories, which no longer survives.⁶⁶ The only substantial extant works of this kind are the works of George of Pisidia, who commemorated several imperial campaigns in verse in the early seventh century.⁶⁷

The most important and innovative of these writers in Latin was certainly Claudian Claudianus, who composed a collection of long poems to honour individuals in the western imperial court at the turn of the fifth century.⁶⁸ These included celebrations of the consulships of the Emperor Honorius and the *magister militum* Stilicho alongside vituperations of political rivals, and poems of around 500 lines which describe successful military campaigns against the Goths and the defeat of the African usurper Gildo. These works were explicitly political in focus and were concerned above all with praising the focal figure, often in a ceremonial setting. Quite whether all of this represented the emergence of a new genre of epic-panegyric has been much debated by scholars, however, and it is likely that Claudian saw himself as an epicist rather than a proponent of a new form.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, his works demonstrate the degree to which poetic conventions were changing in this period and the language of epic deployed in novel ways.

Corippus seems to have known Claudian's writing well, and like the earlier poet incorporated elements of panegyric into his work, but his own combination of these literary influences was unique.⁷⁰ This union took rather different form in the *Iohannis* and the more explicitly encomiastic *In laudem Iustini Augusti minoris*, but both betray the traces of their mixed parentage. The celebratory function of the earlier poem is clear from the outset: the prologue presents the *Iohannis* as a contribution to the formal triumphal celebrations which

⁶⁵ Livrea (1978) is the standard edition; Steinrück (1999) all of the fragments with further comments from Kanavou (2015). For historical context compare Eide et al. (1998), 1182–5; for poetic context Miguélez-Cavero (2008), 59–60. The poem has variously been attributed to Olympiodorus of Thebes, Cyrus of Panopolis and Claudian, but none is certain.

⁶⁶ *De Mag.* III.28; see Lee (2007), 40–2 for an overview. ⁶⁷ Howard-Johnston (2010), 16–35.

⁶⁸ The bibliography is substantial. See especially Alan Cameron (1970) on the political background, Ware (2012) on the poetic aspirations, and now Coombe (2018).

⁶⁹ Schindler (2009), 59–172, makes the case for a distinct genre with Claudian as a foundational figure. Her work draws on the earlier observations of Nissen (1940); Estefania Alvarez (1985) and especially Hofmann (1988). Ware (2012), 18–31, rejects this and regards Claudian as an epicist. Compare also the discussion in Gärtner (2008), 26–32.

⁷⁰ Amann (1885), 33–7; Appell (1904), 13–14.

marked the end of John's campaign, but does so in a way that demonstrates the poet's aspirations clearly:

I have dared, noble lords (*proceres*), to tell of the laurels of the victor: I will sing festive songs in this time of peace. It pleased me to write about John's greatness in war, about the deeds of the hero that will be read by generations yet to come. For literature makes everything known in this long-lived world as it remembers all the battles of the ancient leaders. Who would know of the great Aeneas, who the harsh Achilles, who the brave Hector ... if literature did not keep alive the memory of their ancient deeds?⁷¹

The epic rejoices in the recent successes of a still-living general and frames them as a celebration of the ruling Emperor Justinian. If John is Aeneas in the poem, Justinian is Jupiter: the presiding deity whose will sets the hero in motion and whose benevolent guidance creates order out of chaos. This is made clear at the opening of the first book, in a passage that recalls the victory monuments of Justinian's empire and the formalized rhetoric of victory:

Glorious among them, Justinian, Emperor, arise from your high throne pleased in your triumphs, and as victor dispense laws to the broken tyrants, for your noble soles tread down all kings, and their purple is ready to serve the Roman realm. Yet under your feet the vanquished enemy is laid out, hard cords bind the peoples, and ropes tighten their hands behind their backs with strong knots, their savage necks bend with the weight of their chains.⁷²

Explicit as this celebration is, Justinian occupies a relatively minor role within the narrative of the *Iohannis*, and this encomium is tempered substantially after the opening lines.⁷³ The emperor had never visited Africa and is likely to have been something of an abstract presence to the inhabitants of the region, even those privileged few who were present for the first delivery of the *Iohannis*. But Justinian was notoriously jealous of his status and monitored his successful generals very closely; Corippus' failure to exalt John using the full lexicon of panegyric praise can probably

⁷¹ *Ioh* Proem 1–8, 10: *Victoris, proceres, praesumpsit dicere lauros | tempore pacifico carmina festa canam. | scribere me libuit magnum per bella Iohannem, | uenturo generi facta legenda uiri. | omnia nota facit longaeuo littera mundo, | dum memorat ueterum proelia cuncta ducum. | qui magnum Aeneam, saeuum quis nosset Achillem, | Hectora quis fortem ... | littera ni priscum commemoraret opus?*

⁷² *Ioh* 1.14–22: *has inter medius solio sublimis ab alto, | Iustinianae, tuis, princeps, assurge triumphis | laetus et infractis uictor da iura tyrannis: | inclita nam cunctos calcant uestigia reges | laetaque Romano seruit iam purpura regno | sed pedibusque tuis uictus prosternitur hostis | et gentes fera uincla ligant nodoque tenaci | post tergum implicitas stringunt retinacula palmas, | saeua superpositis plectuntur colla catenis.*

⁷³ Gärtner (2015), 334, perceptively identifies the *Iohannis* as a narrative epic packaged within a panegyric. Rance (2022), 104, notes that Justinian occupies a similarly ambivalent position – 'at once remote and central' – in Procopius' *Wars*.

be explained as a pragmatic decision as much as anything else.⁷⁴ But this is also a reflection of the mixed literary inheritance within which he worked and his literary aspirations. If Claudian used the language of epic in composing his panegyrics, Corippus used elements of panegyric within his own epic. The result was a rather different project which emphasized narrative quite as much as praise. This has important implications for how we should read the poem.

Most historical analyses of *Iohannis* have placed a greater emphasis on its panegyric aspects, and much less on its specific significance as an epic. It is commonly assumed that the primary purpose of the poem was to celebrate John's victories and hence Justinianic rule in North Africa. The *encomia* embedded within the poem, the author's rather bland presentation of John as a pious Christian general, and the wider narrative of imperial victory support the view that the politics of the *Iohannis* are essentially straightforward. Corippus' occasional authorial interjections also add eulogistic comments into the narrative, and it is assumed that the public delivery of the poem served an explicitly political – and panegyric – purpose.⁷⁵ This interpretation is supported by some recurrent structural oppositions within the text, which have been much discussed in the scholarship – of the contrast, for example, between Christian regiments of order and victory on the Roman side, and the pagan hordes of chaos and abject defeat on the Moorish.⁷⁶ In two influential articles, Averil Cameron established this position and argued that the *Iohannis* was specifically intended as a celebration of imperial power during a period of religious conflict.⁷⁷ From the mid-540s, certain prominent members of the North African church had opposed imperial doctrine during the so-called Three Chapters controversy, when Justinian attempted to fashion a theological orthodoxy across his extended empire. Cameron regarded the *Iohannis* as a counterpoint to these escalating tensions – an assertion of provincial loyalty through the medium of classical epic, which might inspire loyalty among the African population in turn.⁷⁸ This influential reading presents the *Iohannis* as a spectacular piece of imperial propaganda, written for the nervous inhabitants of Africa by one of their number. In this view, the praise of both Justinian and John, and the thanksgiving for

⁷⁴ Consolino (2015), 193. ⁷⁵ Schindler (2009), 239; Gärtner (2015), 332–4.

⁷⁶ See especially Tommasi Moreschini (2002a) and Zarini (2010).

⁷⁷ Cameron (1982), 12–33; Cameron (1984).

⁷⁸ Cameron (1982), 16: 'He was consciously writing not only to please the Byzantine rulers, but to persuade the local population of the Byzantine case, at a time when such persuasion was urgently needed, not only to justify the military situation, but also to assist the reception of Justinian's unpopular attempts to enforce eastern orthodoxy.'

military victory, were not simply a statement of gratitude, but a reminder that the inhabitants of imperial Africa should themselves be thankful.

Cameron's work has been crucial in focusing scholarly attention on the historical agency of the *Iohannis* as a text and the social circumstances of its composition, and not simply viewing it as a literary curiosity or as a source of information to be plundered, but her emphasis on its panegyric function risks neglecting its particular status as a work of *epic* specifically. Corippus was the first Latin poet for generations to produce a historical epic on this scale, and his work all the more unusual for presenting the events of the very recent past at such length.⁷⁹ Each of these factors indelibly shaped its representation of the world and of the position of the empire within it. In consciously producing an epic, Corippus was certainly making an extravagant cultural statement about Roman power in Africa, but did so in a medium which imposed certain narrative demands of its own – and which opened up areas for imaginative interrogation which would have been inaccessible in other literary media. The precise rhythms of Corippus' narrative differed in some ways from the earlier proponents of the form, but it remains striking that there are central elements of the *Iohannis* which are utterly without parallel in contemporary panegyric modes.⁸⁰ The rich description of John's first view of the African coast is a reminder that Corippus' image of Byzantine Africa could often be unsettling, and the poem was as likely to provoke a raft of contradictory responses in its audiences as it was to commit to a whole-hearted celebration of imperial power. We see much the same thing in the long and extraordinarily violent battle sequences which dominate the latter part of the *Iohannis* and comprise around one fifth of its total length. This stylized but relentless bloodshed was a commonplace of Latin (and Greek) historical epic, but rarely surfaced at all in panegyrics, where battles are more commonly euphemized and bloodless.⁸¹ Corippus' contribution to this

⁷⁹ Many earlier Latin epicists had certainly responded to recent historical events in their work, and Nethercut (2019) demonstrates effectively that such works were the rule rather than the exception (and that even 'mythological' epics had important historiographical aspects). Compare also Schindler (2009), 32–4; Leigh (2008), 995; Westall (2014), 39–43. Yet it remains important that the canonical models available to Corippus are likely to have been concerned primarily with events in the distant past (with the partial exception of Lucan).

⁸⁰ Compare Schindler (2009), 231–8 (acknowledging that Corippus is more 'epic' than other poets in her study). On Corippus' narrative (especially in comparison to earlier historical epics), see especially Hofmann (1988), Hajdú (2001), and the discussion in Chapter 3.

⁸¹ Menander Rhetor, II.373–4, does suggest that battle sequences could be part of panegyric, but not as a central feature. The few extant examples are very short. Compare *Pan Lat* IV.29.5–6; Claud., *I Stil* 10–115, VI *Hon* 210–21; Merobaudes *Pan* I. Fr IIB 16–24; *Pan* II 148–55. There is nothing comparable to the very long *aristeiae* of Corippus. On these, see Schindler (2007) and (2009), 253–72 (arguing for epic elements with panegyric sensibility). This is explored further in Chapter 5.

visceral poetic tradition has been the subject of some debate, but the precise context in which he did this – namely in the post-war environs of an exhausted Carthage – deserves further attention.

These themes are magnified still further in the long historical analepsis which dominates Books III and IV of the *Iohannis*, in which the poet recalls the recent history of imperial North Africa in the voice of a subaltern soldier called Liberatus. Narrative 'flashbacks' of this kind were a commonplace of classical narrative, but are anomalous in praise poetry. Working on the assumption that Corippus' intentions were essentially panegyric, many commentators have been content to assert that this analepsis presented the Byzantine past in essentially laudatory terms – that it celebrated a 'golden age' of imperial Africa before the rebellious Moor Antalas came along and ruined everything.⁸² In fact, Liberatus presents a much more unstable account of the period from 533 to 546 which does celebrate moments of peace (and Moorish aggression), but which places a far greater emphasis on imperial incompetence and infighting and directly addresses the culpability of the Africans in the disasters which they faced. Corippus complicates this image still further with the addition of competing narratives, which interpret the same events from the perspective of the Moorish commander Antalas, John Troglita, and (briefly) the assembled populace of Carthage.⁸³ This exploration of narrative modes was standard enough in the epic tradition, but provided Corippus with a medium for interrogating the recent past that would have been unavailable in other genres.

'To Grant the Conquered Clemency and Crush the Proud in War'

A more subtle illustration of the complexity of the epic inheritance is apparent in a trope which would initially seem to lend itself well to the demands of panegyric or encomium.⁸⁴ In the opening book of the *Iohannis*, Justinian despatches John Troglita to Africa with the following commands:

Hold well to the ancient laws of our ancestors: lift up the weary and destroy the rebellious. The love of piety defines us: to grant clemency to all those who are subject; the honour of virtue: to tame those peoples who are proud.⁸⁵

⁸² Compare for example Zarini (2010), 100: 'Certains problèmes cruciaux ne peuvent évidemment pas être totalement occultés par le poète panegyriste Mais ces nuances restent exceptionnelles.'

⁸³ These narrative overlays are analysed in detail in Chapter 3.

⁸⁴ Lausberg (1989) is fundamental on this borrowing.

⁸⁵ *Ioh* I.146–9 *tu prisca parentum | iura tene, fessos releua, confringe rebelles. | hic pietatis amor, subiectis parcere, nostrae est, | hic uirtutis honor, gentes domitare superbas.*

In Book II, John invokes these instructions when he demands that the rebellious Moorish leader Antalas surrender:

But the emperor [Justinian], acting mercifully, prefers everything to belong to him so that he might hold, save, and rule all people, lifting up those subject to him and crushing the proud with his strength.⁸⁶

The principal inter-text in both of these passages was certainly the famous couplet which comes at the end of the parade of Roman heroes in *Aeneid* VI – a natural enough point of reference in a scene which was profoundly Virgilian. Here, Anchises advises his son Aeneas of Rome's imperial destiny, (in the elegant translation of Shadi Bartsch):

You, Roman, remember your own arts: to rule
The world with law, impose your ways on peace,
Grant the conquered clemency, and crush the proud in war.⁸⁷

Corippus returns to this refrain multiple times over the course of the *Iohannis* and reinvents the mantra in his own terms. The motif is explicitly invoked twice more in the exchange of embassies between John and Antalas, first later in Book II, and then when the Roman ambassador returns from his mission in Book IV.⁸⁸ Two further passages apply the principle to John's negotiations with friendly Moorish leaders. In Book VI, representatives of the Astrices themselves invoke the Virgilian couplet in asserting their deference to imperial rule, and John does the same when riding to the aid of his beleaguered ally Cusina in the final book of the epic.⁸⁹ Echoes of the same passage can be heard throughout the *Iohannis* as a recurrent leitmotiv.⁹⁰ As Marion Lausberg and Maria Assunta Vinchesi have argued, Corippus' deft reworking of the refrain elsewhere marries the Virgilian contrast of *superbi* and *subiecti* with the Christian opposition between *humiles* (humble) and *superbi*, and hence partially reframes the famous Latin motif within a Christian mode.⁹¹

⁸⁶ *Ioh* II.366–8: *sed princeps clementer agens sic omnia mauult | esse sua, ut cunctos, saluetque habeatque regatque, | subiectos releuans, frangens uirtute superbos.*

⁸⁷ Virg. *Aen* VI.851–3. *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento | (haec tibi erunt artes) pacique imponere morem, | parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.* Tr. Bartsch (2020), 148.

⁸⁸ *Ioh* II.374–6 (and cf. II.357–60); IV.343–8.

⁸⁹ *Ioh* VI.425–6; VIII.461–4. On these passages, see Chapters 4 and 5.

⁹⁰ Stache (1976), 310–11, compiles a useful table of these allusions in both the *Ioh* and the *Laus*.

⁹¹ Lausberg (1989), 110; Vinchesi (1983), 107. See, for example. 1 Peter 5:5: 'God resisteth the proud, but to the humble He giveth grace' (*Deus superbis resistit, humilibus autem dat gratiam*), and compare Luke 1:51.

These allusions complement the panegyric function of the *Iohannis*, of course, and might be read simply as a neat display of poetic virtuosity to political ends, but within the context of Corippus' epic the refrain has rather different implications, not least because the sheer scale of the poem allows the theme to be explored in depth. Over the course of his work, Corippus articulates a view of Roman imperial power defined by the collaboration of the willing *subiecti* – which could include provincials like himself, as well as barbarian groups – quite as much as by the imposition of the force of arms. This was something new.⁹² Corippus' interrogations of the opposition between *superbi* and *subiecti*, and the role of both 'the proud and the subject' in the unfolding narrative of Rome's destiny, often come at precisely the moments when these distinctions are blurred. John invokes the principle when he needs to distinguish between trusted allied Moors and those barbarians who were in revolt: it is only with the help of the former that the latter can be suppressed.⁹³ It is the same motif which allows the commander to separate blameless provincial Afri from the rapacious rebel Mauri: his job is to defend one and defeat the other.⁹⁴ This proved a particularly helpful distinction in the face of the complex realities of the early occupation: Corippus' view of this political calculus was not neutral, but the epic form allowed him to probe this sensitive issue. As a citizen of the newly imperial African provinces, now ruled by a Greek-speaking elite and sustained by an army drawn from across the ancient world, Corippus might be regarded as a spokesman for the willing *subiecti*, and perhaps regarded the subject peoples as a constitutive elements of the empire.⁹⁵ As David Quint has argued, epic was traditionally the poetry of the imperial centre – the foundational song of victory and triumph – but Corippus' was a work written from the periphery and hence a Latin contribution to a polyglot empire.⁹⁶

The present study argues that the *Iohannis* was inherently political in its positioning, but that its overt celebration of John's military success should not distract us from the simmering problems within imperial North Africa which the epic frequently acknowledges. In its own way, the *Iohannis* slung a giant 'Mission Accomplished' banner across the streets of Byzantine Carthage, but it did not obscure entirely the reality behind this celebration.

⁹² Riedlberger (2010), 381–2, raises this point, but maintains that the *Iohannis* was still essentially panegyric in function.

⁹³ *Iob* VI.425–6; VIII.461–4. Indeed it could be argued that the use of the motif in the extended exchange with Antalas is intended to do the same thing.

⁹⁴ *Iob* II.337–9, 344–9. ⁹⁵ Riedlberger (2010), 381–2.

⁹⁶ Quint (1992), especially 1–34. The connections between the *Aeneid* and Augustus' political programme in particular have been extensively interrogated. See Hardie (1986).

As many commentators noted at the time, when George W. Bush did this during a notorious photo shoot on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* after the fall of Baghdad in 2003, he buried countless social, political and economic difficulties under a hubristic statement of military success. In its way, the *Iohannis* sought to do much the same thing, claiming that a spectacular victory over barbaric foes had brought a period of sustained social chaos and internecine conflict to an end. This was a recasting of the imperial project in the teleology of epic. As we might expect, this often resounded to the wider glory of Justinian's project: it placed that emperor alongside Augustus, Jupiter and Christ as a presiding figure in the political firmament, and the conquests of his rule as the realization of a Roman destiny centuries in the making. But the *Iohannis* also ran contrary to established narratives at times. The battles won by John in the African hinterland were not the simple victories euphemised in contemporary panegyric or the well-ordered manoeuvres of classicizing historiography, but bloody, brutal struggles of muscle, metal and sinew marked by dust, tears and severed limbs. Corippus' accounts of the recent past also differed greatly from the well-worn talking points of the imperial chancellery. There was no space here for the miraculous salvation of Africa from the heretic Vandals – that group is presented surprisingly fondly in the poem – and much more emphasis on civil discord, squabbles between incompetent bureaucrats and the profound suffering caused by plague. The conventions of epic granted Corippus the space to explore these themes, and the way he did so provides invaluable material for historical study. Corippus gives us a perspective on the recent North African past and the experience of imperial occupation that we do not find so clearly anywhere else: this was a view that remembered the later Vandal period with some nostalgia, which regarded the Byzantine invasion of 533/4 as a new chapter in an ongoing struggle rather than a single moment of liberation, and that recognized the complexity of the interactions between the 'Moorish' barbarians and the many representatives of imperial power, both legitimate and illegitimate.

Another group lived in North Africa around the year 550, of course, one which may have responded to Corippus' account of John's landing in a range of ways. The main narrative of the *Iohannis* is concerned with imperial victories over the 'Moors', but it is hard to know what individuals identified as such would have made of the poem. It is likely that some would have been willing participants in the triumphal celebrations: as we shall see, allies like Cusina, Ifisdaias and (later) Iaudas were crucial to John's military effort, and are acknowledged as such in Corippus' long poem.⁹⁷ All had risen to

⁹⁷ Discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

prominence in the cultural melting pot of late Vandal and early Byzantine Africa, and some may have enjoyed a classical education of their own. Others, like Antalas, had once enjoyed a similar privilege but had fallen out of favour and would have found themselves as the trophies of John's parade, rather than on the side of the victors. They too may have understood the outline of Corippus' poem, but are unlikely to have sympathized with its wider message. But, in reality, most 'Moors' in this period would have known little of poetic posturing in the streets of Carthage, and would have cared less. This too is important to remember. Corippus provides us with a view from the provincial capital of imperial Carthage, set in a rigid and classicizing frame. Unexpected as it may be in many of its details, it is not a definitive portrait of North Africa in this confusing period, but it deserves to be taken seriously nevertheless.

The Structure of the Present Book

Chapter 2, 'Prelude to a War', addresses the history of Byzantine Africa from the first occupation in summer 533 to John's landing in 546. This is an unusually well-documented period in the history of late antique North Africa, thanks to the survival of the edicts which established imperial rule in the region, a range of archaeology and epigraphy which testify to the transformation of the region's civic government, and a number of literary sources (including Corippus' *Iohannis*). Chief among these sources are the two books of Procopius' *Vandal Wars*, a long history of the campaigns in North Africa, which were part of his eight-book classicizing history of the Wars of Justinian's reign. Procopius describes the collapse of the Vandal kingdom and periodic imperial campaigns against the Moorish groups of Numidia, Byzacena and Tripolitania, but much of his account is given over to detailed narratives of a succession of military mutinies and plots which took place across the region. This account is frequently confusing and is complicated still further by additional passages in his panegyric *Buildings* (Book VI of which describes Justinian's building programme across North Africa), and his notorious *Secret History*, which lends a scandalous sheen to the events recounted in *Wars* (and often contradicts the longer account).

This early occupation of North Africa is typically presented in modern scholarship as a steady consolidation of imperial rule in the face of resistance from Moorish barbarians in the first instance and recalcitrant African churchmen in the second. This traditional view has shaped the reading of the *Iohannis* and its intended function quite profoundly. This chapter argues that the principal challenges to imperial rule in Africa came from

within the administration. This was manifested most clearly in a series of mutinies and revolts within the army, leading ultimately to a coup, probably in early 546, in which a senior Roman commander named Guntharith seized authority in Carthage. That many of the leading figures in the administration seem to have come to terms with this tyrant testifies to the weaknesses within the imperial system, and to the challenges which faced John at the time of his landing around six months later. Guntharith's coup was merely the latest in a long series of crises, all of which generated new problems across the wider frontier region. This chapter briefly explores the nature of relations between frontier commanders and their 'barbarian' neighbours, many of whom aspired to office within the imperial system. It suggests that the 'Moorish' crisis which John faced in 546 (and which had smouldered for three or four years by that stage) was the direct consequence of internecine struggles within the imperial system, as allies increasingly acted in their own interest.

Chapter 3, 'Past and Future in the *Iohannis*', considers the underlying narrative structures of Corippus' epic and how the poet positions the campaigns of John Troglita in their wider context. The chapter first returns to the early Byzantine period, discussed in Chapter 2, and assesses how the events of circa 530–546 are presented in the *Iohannis*, particularly in Books III and IV. These books are dominated by a long analeptic 'flashback' in the voice of a North African officer named Liberatus, which purports to explain the origins of the recent troubles to John but which is then complicated by shorter surveys of the same events from the perspective of different characters. Although Liberatus explicitly states that his intention is to ascribe the collapse of African order to the Moorish leader Antalas, his narrative presents a much less straightforward picture than has sometimes been supposed. As a succinct verse history of North Africa between the late 520s and 546, Liberatus' account differs wildly from contemporary imperial propaganda. He ascribes the collapse of the Vandal kingdom to Moorish pressure rather than the imperial reconquest, and indeed laments the end of a privileged period in African history. While he goes on to present the earliest years of the Byzantine occupation as an idyllic period, a latent violence remains within it, and much of his narrative is given over to military mutiny, war and civic unrest. It is clear from both emphasis and omission that Liberatus (or Corippus) was keen to exculpate certain prominent figures from their role in this crisis, but the narrative cannot be read as an exoneration of the imperial administration. This sense is magnified by the addition of further historical perspectives on the same event, including that of Antalas.

This chapter argues that these passages must be considered as meaningful responses to the recent past within Byzantine Africa, and as functional parts of the *Iohannis*. It is suggested that Corippus' presentation of these counter-narratives in different voices created a space for the examination of a complex past which would otherwise have been unavailable to him. By articulating the disquiet of Roman Africans at recent upheaval (through Liberatus), and Moorish vitriol at imperial hypocrisy (through Antalas), Corippus could acknowledge different aspects of the recent past without directly championing them. John Troglita's summary narrative of the same period concludes this troubling section of the *Iohannis* by reframing these events in more positive terms, but much of this work is left to be done in the remainder of the poem.

The second part of the chapter looks at the proleptic passages in the *Iohannis* – those moments when Corippus' narrative moves from the narrated time of John's campaigns to their anticipated resolution and the composition of the epic itself. As noted, the *Iohannis* was closely connected to the triumphal celebrations which marked John's victories, and the prospect of this happy conclusion underpins the text as a whole. Significantly, this teleology is not only explored through many direct references to the coming triumph, but also to the counterfactual 'futures' anticipated by the Moors. In the two prophetic digressions of Books III and VI, the Moors are presented with accounts of the future which they choose to interpret in terms that are positive to themselves. Corippus' resolution of these accounts through authorial interjections (and the interpretative glosses of John Troglita) helps to underscore the inevitability of imperial victory while emphasizing the sense of crisis within the historical narrative.

The later chapters of the book are focused on particular themes within the *Iohannis*, and consider the poem's value as a historical source. Chapter 4, 'Corippus and the Moorish World', addresses the shifting representation of African groups within the poem. Studies of Corippus' ethnography have tended either to present the text as an example of imperial chauvinism, which contrasts lawful Christian Romans with their chaotic pagan enemy, or to plunder the poem for discrete points of information without full acknowledgement of their literary setting. Although both approaches have had important results, they oversimplify the complex interplay of literary and historical elements within the *Iohannis*. More significantly, they neglect the very prominent role played by 'Moorish' allies within John's campaigns in North Africa, and Corippus' emphasis upon them. If the poet wished to denigrate the defeated barbarians, he also needed to find space for the loyal allies upon whom this success depended.

This chapter examines the different lenses through which Corippus represented the Moorish world. It looks first at the many terms used by the poet to refer to all of the 'Moorish' groups within North Africa – ally or enemy alike. It suggests that Corippus' wide deployment of this language was intended to accentuate the complexity of John's task, not simply in defeating the 'innumerable peoples' arranged against him, but also in incorporating others within the imperial programme. His campaign was successful, this implies, precisely because the general did not regard the African world in simple binary terms.

It then considers the specific ethnonyms within the *Iohannis* and addresses their value for our understanding of North Africa in this period. Following the work of Yves Modéran, it notes that Corippus evidently distinguished between the 'Moorish' inhabitants of the Roman provinces and the groups who lived on or beyond the frontiers, particularly in Tripolitania and Syrtica. Where Modéran suggested these distinctions were absolute, however – on the ground and in the mind of the poet – I argue that certain forms of identity in this period may have transcended the ordered ethnography beloved of modern commentators. Corippus' poem may well indicate that the 'Laguatan' identity (preserved in many forms in the *Iohannis*, but unique to the poem) may well have been much more fluid than has previously been acknowledged, and incorporated a range of different groups, regardless of their origins.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the long 'catalogue of tribes' which opens Book II of the *Iohannis*, and which has been central to many modern reconstructions of the Moorish world of the sixth century. It is argued that this catalogue was intended to evoke the final triumphal ceremony which marked the conclusion of John's campaigns in 548. This connects the opening of the Moorish war to its eventual resolution – and hence connects directly to the proleptic themes explored in Chapter 3. No less important, it also reveals the cognitive assumptions which underpinned imperial views of the Moorish world from Carthage. This was not an ordered 'map' of tessellating tribal groups (however much modern commentators would love to have such a thing), but was instead an image of a diverse – but ultimately subjugated – world.

Chapter 5, 'For Every Blade Was Red', examines Corippus' accounts of military activity in the *Iohannis*, and particularly his use of startlingly violent imagery. The *Iohannis* is our only extended narrative account of the Justinianic army on campaign in North Africa. It provides important details regarding military strategy and organization in the region, even if these are sometimes difficult to rescue from the thick soup of epic

mythologizing. The first part of this chapter discusses the likely sequence of John's campaigns in 546, 547 and 548. Certain conclusions are drawn regarding the size of John's army, its constitution and the strategic goals that he followed, as well as Moorish fighting practices in the same period.

The second part of the chapter considers the long battle accounts within the *Iohannis* and the political function that they may have had. Stylized combat sequences were a very common feature of Greek and Latin epic, and Corippus proved an adept continuator of this tradition. His accounts are broadly orthodox in form and follow established practice in attempting to add new and increasingly visceral imagery to the poetic repertoire. In large part, this may be explained simply as a demonstration of the writer's literary ambitions, but it is argued that violent imagery of battle was also a means to address the ambiguities of 'Moorish' identity discussed in the previous chapter. The moment of battle clarified loyalties – and hence identities – in a manner that was not otherwise possible. The extraordinarily violent imagery accentuated this process, essentially transforming the 'good' Moors into heroes (and so comparable to their Roman allies), and the 'bad' into abject and dismembered body parts. If the *Iohannis* was intended to reconstitute the body politic in North Africa, it frequently did so in an unusually literal manner.

The final chapter, 'Christianity and Paganism in the *Iohannis*', considers religious themes. It explores first the Christian underpinnings of the text and notes that the *Iohannis* rested on religious assumptions even as it used the imagery and rhetoric of classical epic to recount an essentially secular narrative. It then examines specific Christian details and what they reveal about the contemporary tensions within the region. Although several modern commentators have argued that Corippus retained a pointed silence regarding the ongoing Three Chapters controversy, and intended his poem to counterbalance the seething theological tensions of the period, this reticence may have been overstated. The epic includes two recognizable portraits of African churchmen who played an important role as spokesmen in the developing crisis. Far from ignoring contemporary religious problems, Corippus may have intended his poem to accentuate the support of the entire African populace for the imperial military programme.

The *Iohannis* is also a unique source for 'Moorish' religious practices in this period. The last section of this chapter looks at the representations of specific African gods in the poem and details of their worship. These passages provide tantalizing material for historical erudition and have often been connected to the fragmentary archaeological and epigraphic evidence for late African paganism, and to a range of textual sources, from

the earliest classical authors to the medieval period. While it is tempting to suppose that Corippus presents a timeless image of Moorish religion, it is clear that the *Iohannis* was very much a product of the mid-sixth century. The poet evidently describes this world through the thick lenses of his literary influences, but the practices that may be identified behind these accounts are strikingly different from those apparent from our other sources. Even ancient gods could be put to new purposes in the changing political and social world of the mid-sixth century. Equally important, Corippus' *Iohannis* was composed at a time when the imperial authorities in Africa were consolidating the recent military victories with a programme of evangelism into the frontier regions, pre-desert and oasis communities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of this programme and of how this changes our understanding of Corippus' text.

Outline of the Poem

The structure of the *Iohannis* is not particularly complicated, but neither is it absolutely straightforward, especially to readers coming to the poem for the first time. The three principal battles that occupy the last four books of the poem took place over three years (546, 547, 548). These need to be carefully distinguished in the mind of the reader. More important still is the long analepsis that occupies much of Books III and IV, in which the poet explicates the situation in late Vandal and early Byzantine Africa. The tensions and conflicts explored here are historically distinct from those which occupy the remainder of the epic, but are related to them in some important ways, not least for providing the moral context for the battles which follow. Corippus' immediate audience would no doubt have recognized this without difficulty, and appreciated the sometimes subtle slippage between the crises of the past and the present.

To aid the modern reader – and particularly to lay the groundwork for the discussion that follows – a brief outline of the constituent books of the *Iohannis* is presented here.

Preface

The preface is dedicated to the *proceres* (prominent citizens) of Carthage, and it immediately sets the poem in a triumphant (and triumphal) frame. Corippus' ostensible concern here is to set John's deeds alongside those of Achilles and Aeneas, while insisting on his own unworthiness to compose a poem in the manner of Virgil.

Book I

While Corippus' stated intention is to celebrate Roman victory – and a short celebration of imperial power is included in lines 9–22 – the opening lines of his epic are otherwise surprisingly bleak. The first clear set piece is an image of African suffering: 'Everywhere lamentations sounded, anguished terror coursed through everyone, and everything shaken by dreadful dangers' [*Ioh* I.42–3]; 'Africa, the third part of the world, perished in flames and smoke' [*Ioh* I.47]. Confronted with this suffering, Justinian appoints John as his general and his successes in the Persian Wars are recounted [*Ioh* I.48–109]. John is brought before the emperor and instructed to save the beleaguered region [*Ioh* I.110–58], to 'lift up the weak and destroy the rebellious' [*Ioh* I.147].

The fleet then sets sail; sailors tell one another the stories of the Trojan War as they pass the site of that city [*Ioh* I.159–196], and John's son Peter is sufficiently inspired by this to identify himself with Aeneas' son Ascanius and his father with the Trojan hero [*Ioh* I.197–207]. The fleet sails on to Sicily, passing Scylla and Charybdis without difficulty [*Ioh* I.208–8]. During the night, a storm picks up and John is visited by two visions – first a demonic Moorish figure who taunts the general that he will never cross safely to Africa, and then an angel who inspires him to courage [*Ioh* I.229–70]. The fleet is then beset by a storm, which is overcome by John's sincere prayers to God [*Ioh* I.271–309].

John's first sight of Africa is the war-torn landscape introduced at the start of this chapter [*Ioh* I.323–340]. John then reflects on Belisarius' landing more than a decade earlier, his own role within it, and the death of his brother Pappus during the campaign that followed [*Ioh* I.341–416]. The fleet then lands at Carthage, the troops are immediately assembled and march out from Carthage in nine orderly columns which Corippus compares to a colony of bees. The coming conflict recalls the mythical Gigantomachy [*Ioh* I.417–59]. The army makes its way to Antonia Castra in northern Byzacium, where a messenger from the Moorish leader Antalas threatens John and recalls his own victories over the commander Solomon, as well as those of his people over Emperor Maximian at the end of the third century CE. John remains unimpressed [*Ioh* I.460–508]. As the troops prepare for battle, John instructs his commanders and expounds on the treachery and strategic guile of the Moors. Inspired, the Roman troops applaud the general, bringing the first book to a close on a tense but positive note [*Ioh* I.509–81].

Book II

The first contact with the Moors results in a minor victory for the Romans, and Book II opens with the aftermath: the defeated Moors scatter into the landscape [*Ioh* II.1–23]. Almost immediately, however, Corippus describes the regrouping of these Moorish forces and includes a long and detailed catalogue on the leaders and their allies [*Ioh* II.24–161] despite lamenting the difficulty of rendering these names in verse [*Ioh* II.26–7]. This catalogue serves as a first order of battle for the conflict which takes place in Book V and is a pendant to the similar account of Roman forces at the end of Book IV.

Corippus next recounts ongoing skirmishes between the Romans under Geiserith and scattered Moorish groups, using a range of metaphors derived from meteorology and the natural world. Although they fight bravely, the Romans are forced back [*Ioh* II.162–234]. Informed of the Moorish attack, John musters a cavalry force in relief and a storm forces the Moors to retreat. John then sends scouts to reconnoitre the Moorish positions and the Roman camp is established [*Ioh* II.235–87]. John spends a sleepless night worrying about the challenges facing him, especially the need to save the African people from the rebellious Moors. He discusses these anxieties with his adjutant Ricinarius, who advocates diplomacy and piety in an explicitly Virgilian mode: John should spare the humble and subdue the proud. If the general pursues this strategy, no blame can be attached to him should he fail [*Ioh* II.288–354]. Encouraged by this, John sends an ultimatum to Antalas, asserting Roman authority and ordering the rebel's surrender. He speaks disparagingly of Moorish military tactics and religion and of the fate that will meet them [*Ioh* II.355–413]. Following the departure of the messenger, night falls and the contrasting dreams of the two camps are described: the Romans anticipate violent conflict and victory; the Moors fear flight and captivity [*Ioh* II.414–88].

Book III

John and his commanders exchange war stories to open Book III. The general asks his tribune Liberatus to explain to him the origins of the current conflict [*Ioh* III.12–62]. Liberatus' account of the earlier history of North Africa takes up the remainder of Book III and much of Book IV. Within the narrative space of the poem, all of this takes place in the evening before the first major battle of the epic, but the historical frame of reference is much wider: it traces the current problems from the turn of the sixth

century and lingers particularly on the last days of the Vandal kingdom (c.529–34 CE) and the crises of the early Byzantine period (esp. c.540–4 CE). The retrospective narrative is conventional in epic, but is justified by John's absence from Africa for most of this period. Nevertheless, much of this would have been familiar to the immediate audience of the *Iohannis*.

The digression opens with an account of the happy state of Africa at the turn of the sixth century, before it was confronted with a 'twin plague' comparable to that suffered in the present [*Ioh* III.63–4]. The first part of the analepsis focuses on the Moorish leader Antalas, and opens with a vivid account of his father Guenfan's journey to an oracle at time of his birth. The rites are described in a curious portmanteau of classical epic elements, and the oracle then provides a prophecy which relates the future course of African history, particularly Antalas' part in it [*Ioh* III.77–156]. His life is then traced through his youth and early manhood and the gradual escalation from livestock rustling and banditry to all-out war against the Vandals [*Ioh* III.156–83]. This culminates with an account of how Antalas' Frexes allied with other groups to end the peace of the Vandal kingdom, first defeating the general 'Hildimer' in an ambush which led to the rise to power of the tyrannical king Gelimer [*Ioh* III.183–261]. After lamenting again the 'two-fold plague' of war and tyranny [*Ioh* III.269–70] caused by Gelimer's usurpation, Liberatus describes the Byzantine conquest and the return of peace to Africa, with Moorish tribes cowed by the power of the empire [*Ioh* III.271–338]. The violence of this occupation is stressed and subsequent struggles with the Moor Iaudas and the rebel Stutias are briefly mentioned – difficulties which may be dated to 535–8 CE [*Ioh* III.302–19].

Following a lacuna in the text, the tone of the digression suddenly becomes much bleaker. Liberatus describes first the plague of 543 CE, with massive loss of life, related social upheaval and a striking loss of public piety: 'All forums were thrown open, and painful disputes came forward. Discord raged throughout the world, stirring up savage quarrels. Piety withdrew completely. No-one was compelled by his conscience to pursue justice' [*Ioh* III.376–9]. Appalled at this impiety, God withdraws His mercy from the region and Antalas sets about plotting his own conflict against Africa [*Ioh* III.343–400]. The Byzantine general Solomon allies with the Moor Cusina to suppress this threat and engages the Moors in combat in a forest. The Byzantine officer Guntarith deliberately flees at a crucial moment and the imperial troops panic. Solomon's death compounds this and the battle is lost [*Ioh* 401–441]. During this struggle, the rebel Stutias emerges as the figurehead of this resistance, and by the end of Book III, his

tyranny is established in conjunction with Moorish leaders. The book closes on a grim note with all of Africa seemingly lost [*Ioh* III.442–60].

Book IV

Following an interjection from Liberatus, Book IV continues his digression on the collapse of Africa into war. He describes first the loss of the city of Hadrumetum in Byzacena, which was betrayed to the rebels through the skulduggery of Stutias [*Ioh* IV.8–59]. Liberatus speaks of his own personal experience as one of the defeated soldiers, first describing the surrender of the city and then his own escape. [*Ioh* IV.60–81].

The imperial cause is offered some hope by the arrival of the new *magister militum* Areobindus, but the division of military authority leads to further fighting [*Ioh* IV.97–8]. The Byzantine commander John, son of Sisiniolus (not to be confused with the hero of the epic, or indeed with the other Johns throughout the text), continues to fight against the Moors with the help of Vandal allies, but recognizes that Stutias poses the more immediate threat [*Ioh* IV.82–135]. John engages with a Moorish army, but the tide turns when Stutias enters the fray, alongside other mutinous Roman troops led by Hermogenes and Taurus. Stutias is killed in the battle and repents his treachery with his dying words [*Ioh* IV.136–218]. John is also killed. Guntharith becomes the leader of the revolt: ‘that evil, deceitful, cursed, dreadful, ill-fated adulterer, bandit, murderer, rapist and foulest agent of war’ [*Ioh* IV.223–4]. This conflict is stopped only by the wisdom of the prefect of Africa, Athanasius, who has Guntharith murdered at a feast [*Ioh* IV.219–42]. Liberatus ends his digression with a general lamentation on the state of Africa, leaving his listeners numbered [*Ioh* IV.243–55].

The *Iohannis* then returns to the narrative present of 546. As dawn breaks, the commanders organize their troops and John prays for support [*Ioh* IV.256–303]. A messenger, Amantius, reaches the army and describes the war council of the Moors, Antalas’ speech to them and their furious response to John’s ultimatum. Antalas insists on his own earlier fidelity to the Roman cause and the imperial betrayal of him – a counter-narrative of sorts to the recent account of Liberatus [*Ioh* IV.304–92]. John then addresses his troops, reminding them of the importance of loyalty within the army and identifying Guntharith and Stutias as illustrations of his point [*Ioh* IV.304–456]. There follows the order of battle of the Roman army, including the Moorish allies Cusina and Ifisdaias [*Ioh* IV.457–563]. The roll call is ended with a description of John and Ricinarius at the centre of the allied line [*Ioh* IV.564–97].

Book V

Book V finally turns to the Battle at Antonia Castra in autumn 546, an engagement that has been promised throughout the text to this point. Most modern editions of the poem include the short account of the Moorish preparations for battle at the end of Book IV: first a description of Ierna's circling of livestock into a defensive rampart, followed by a brief recapitulation of the different groups assembled under Antalas [*Ioh* IV.595–644]. As recent scholarship has shown, however, this was probably intended to be the opening of the fifth book.⁹⁸

The two commanders then address one another across the battlefield, and the Moors release a sacred bull which is inauspiciously killed by a Roman spear. Both armies shout their religious affiliations [*Ioh* V.1–49]. A general description of battle follows [*Ioh* V.50–98]. The bulk of the first half of Book V is taken up with *aristeiae* – descriptions of individual heroic combat, many of which are surprisingly violent [*Ioh* V.100–58; 195–223; 240–348; 439–79]. These accounts are punctuated by descriptions of the wider rhythms of battle – of advances and retreats – and of pointed comparisons to epic archetypes. Amidst this, the Roman forces are victorious and John leads an assault on the Moorish camp, slaughtering animals and camp followers [*Ioh* V.392–438, 480–92]. Facing defeat, the Moorish leader Ierna flees with an icon of the god Gurzil, but he is cut down in his flight and the field is left to the Romans [*Ioh* V.493–527].

Book VI

Book VI is concerned with the aftermath of the victory described in Book V, and with John's disastrous expedition to the southern frontier regions in summer 547. The triumphal return to Carthage is the focus of the opening part of the book, but this proves a temporary reprieve [*Ioh* VI.1–103]. As the Romans celebrate, Moorish opposition is stirred up again by Carcasan and his son Bruten in the distant Syrtic regions [*Ioh* VI.104–44]. Carcasan consults an oracle which foretells that his actions will lead to a great victory – a prophecy the narrator correctly glosses as indicating Roman success at the expense of the Moors. Carcasan then prepares his forces anew [*Ioh* VI.145–220]. John hears of this and leads an expeditionary force towards Tripolitania, in the hope of ending the campaign before it reaches Africa proper [*Ioh* VI.221–92]. Pursuing the retreating Moors into the

⁹⁸ Caramico and Riedlberger (2010).

desert, John and his troops are beset by thirst; John attempts to soothe them by comparing himself to Lucan's Cato [*Ioh* VI.293–343]. The Romans retreat and camp at a river but are cut off from resupply by bad luck [*Ioh* VI.344–90]. John receives ambassadors from a local group called the Astrices and accepts their submission, despite the scepticism of his troops [*Ioh* VI.391–436]. Skirmishers from the Roman and Laguatan armies then encounter one another, and John is persuaded to prepare for battle along a river, despite his own misgivings [*Ioh* VI.437–91]. Battle is started somewhat chaotically. John attempts to maintain defensive lines, but the apparent sight of fleeing Moors leads to an ill-advised attack. The narrator is at pains to exculpate John from responsibility for this mistake [*Ioh* VI.492–550]. Carcasan then attacks the Romans, aided by difficult terrain and the flight of John's Moorish allies [*Ioh* VI.551–606]. Battle is joined. Roman commanders fight heroically, but in a losing cause [*Ioh* VI.607–96]. John attempts to reverse the course of battle, and another leader – John Senior – fights fiercely before losing his life [*Ioh* VI.697–773].

Book VII

John Troglita's defeated army makes its way to an unnamed coastal city, where it takes refuge [*Ioh* VII.1–19]. John and Ricinarius spend a sleepless night discussing first strategy and then the importance of divine support. They agree that Moorish allies are important [*Ioh* VII.20–103]. John encourages his troops and they reassemble at Laribus, a town in Africa Proconsularis [*Ioh* VII.104–49]. Historically, this is where John spent the winter of 547/8 in preparation for another year of campaigning, but this is not made clear in the poem. Meanwhile, news has reached Carthage of the earlier defeat. The widow of John Senior grieves, and the Prefect Athanasius orders the resupply of the field army [*Ioh* VII.150–241].

John's lieutenants resolve tensions between the federate Moorish leaders Ifisdaias and Cusina, and the Romans and their allies assemble [*Ioh* VII.242–80]. Learning of this, Antalas advises Carcasan to feign retreat. John's army gives chase [*Ioh* VII.281–373]. Caecilides/Liberatus (the narrator of Books III and IV) is sent on a scouting mission to the city of Iunci, where the Moors are encamped. He explores the city, engages in a series of skirmishes and takes the Moorish chieftain Varinnus prisoner [*Ioh* VII.374–497]. John then interrogates the Moorish captives and is told by Varinnus of the prophecy that Carcasan received from the oracle of Ammon and of the strategy that Antalas had advised him to pursue.

John explains that the prophecy is misleading and foreshadows only Carcasan's defeat and the deaths of his followers. Varinnus is put to death [*Ioh* VII.498–542].

Book VIII

The final book is entirely concerned with preparations for the climactic battle and with the engagement itself but is incomplete in the extant manuscript. It opens with an outline of John's strategy – either to engage the Moors outside Iunci, or to outmanoeuvre the Moors from there. Antalas and Carcasan make counter-moves, and John resupplies his troops from the port of Lariscus [*Ioh* VIII.1–48]. John's plans are interrupted by the threat of mutiny among his Roman troops. The narrator laments this treachery and the power of rumour. John is furious and prepares to move with Cusina, Ifisdaias, Bezina and Iaudas against the mutineers [*Ioh* VIII.49–126]. The sight of the allied Moors and the calm of their generals soothes the rebels, and they submit [*Ioh* VIII.127–63].

John moves his reconciled army to the Fields of Cato (Campi Catonis), an unknown location, probably in southern Byzacium. Here, he finds the Moors entrenched and provokes them into open combat [*Ioh* VIII.164–79]. John addresses his troops [*Ioh* VIII.180–223]. Meanwhile, the Moors make their own plans [*Ioh* VIII.224–77]. Night falls. John and Ricinarius spend their time in contemplation and prayer; the Moors sacrifice to their gods [*Ioh* VIII.278–317]. At dawn, the Roman troops pray for victory [*Ioh* VIII.318–69].

After a lacuna in the text, John arranges his troops. Battle is joined and the *aristeiae* start again [*Ioh* VIII.370–427]. Cusina rallies his troops, and John sends reinforcements to his ally [*Ioh* VIII.428–78]. The Roman officer Putzintulus commits himself to the battle, undertaking an *aristeia* and knowingly going to his death. In his final words, he anticipates the triumph to come [*Ioh* VIII.479–509]. Corippus then describes the Roman attack, followed by a lengthy *aristeia* of John [*Ioh* VIII.510–86]. Accounts of the heroic fighting of Ricinarius and others follow [*Ioh* VIII.579–626]. John finally kills Carcasan and the Romans take the field [*Ioh* VIII.627–57]. The last lines of the poem have been lost.