

A Subaltern's View of Early Byzantine Africa?: Reading Corippus as History

Andy Merrills*

Corippus' *Iohannis* is both the last classical epic poem to be written in Latin, and a major historical source for the early Byzantine occupation of North Africa (c. 533-551). The poem has conventionally been viewed as an uncritical celebration of the imperial occupation, thanks to its classicizing imagery and the panegyric aspects of its narrative of recent military successes. The present paper argues that this was tempered with a more critical retelling of the first fifteen years of the Byzantine occupation. This is presented in a metadiegetic analepsis ("flash-back"), in the voice of an African officer in the imperial army of occupation. It is suggested that the catalogue of disasters presented here – internecine warfare, social upheaval, and plague – reflect the ambivalent attitude of contemporary Africans to the occupation itself.

Keywords: Corippus, epic poetry, Byzantine Africa, narrative, Moors, Berbers.

In around 551, the North African poet Flavius Cresconius Corippus composed an epic poem of around 4700 lines to celebrate the victories of the Byzantine military commander John Troglita.¹ John had campaigned against "Moorish" groups in Africa, Byzacena and Tripolitania between 546 and 548, and had brought peace to a long-suffering region. The eight books of Corippus' *Iohannis* comprise the last Latin epic of the classical world, written in a critical period in the imperial occupation. At the time, the heartland of North Africa had been under the authority of the eastern empire for seventeen or eighteen years: in the late summer of 533, the imperial commander Belisarius had landed on the coast of Byzacena with an expeditionary force of around 18,000 troops which, within a matter of months, had overthrown the Vandal kingdom, and re-established imperial control over Carthage, Zeugitana (the regions around the capital), Byzacena, Numidia and coastal territories in Mauretania and Tripolitania.² Control over the rich African provinces was a significant victory for Justinian, but its consolidation proved difficult. Imperial forces encountered ongoing resistance from the local powerbrokers who had established themselves in the old frontier regions

* Correspondence details: Associate Professor Dr. Andy Merrills, School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester. Leicester LE1 7RH, United Kingdom, ahm11@le.ac.uk.

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- 1 On his life, cf. Baldwin, *The career of Corippus*; Martindale, *Fl. Cresconius Corippus*. On his name, see Riedlberger *Philologischer, historischer und liturgischer Kommentar*, 28-33, and Riedlberger, *Again on the name "Gorippus"*, who prefers "Gorippus". The familiar form of the name will be used here to avoid confusion.
- 2 For recent overviews of early Byzantine Africa, see Lassère, *Africa, quasi Roma*, 695f-733, and Merrills, *The Byzantine period*.

over the preceding century and these challenges were exacerbated by military mutinies extending to outright revolt within the army of occupation itself.³ In 543 or 544, moreover, the plague reached North Africa, and in the years that followed, religious schism proved no less contagious. During the so-called Three Chapters controversy, African churchmen, especially in Carthage and Byzacena, were active in the resistance to new imperial directives on conciliar orthodoxy.⁴ John Troglita's military victories in the frontier wars of 546-548 thus represented a rare bright spot in the history of the imperial occupation.

Corippus' *Iohannis* is a vital historical source for the understanding of this period in the history of early medieval North Africa, but it has rarely been accorded a central role in the scholarship. Conventionally, histories of the early years of Byzantine Africa have relied most heavily on the Greek prose narrative provided by the two books of Procopius' *Vandal Wars*, supplemented by passages from the same writer's panegyric *Buildings* and his caustic *Secret History*. As a member of Belisarius' entourage, Procopius was an eye-witness to the earliest years of the imperial occupation, and the essential authority of his narrative has rarely been challenged, even if some of its details have been questioned.⁵ Since the late nineteenth century, this historical framework has been supplemented by material evidence of the occupation, particularly in the form of the spectacular city walls and military defences which were erected in its earliest decades.⁶ Ongoing archaeological work also casts new light upon economic activities in Byzantine Africa, and on social change in the towns and their hinterlands.⁷ Other forms of evidence have also lately been subject to closer scrutiny, not least the extraordinary volume of theological writing which emerged in response to the Three Chapters controversy, the full implications of which are still being explored.⁸

Corippus' *Iohannis* has been studied since the publication of the first reliable editions of the epic in the mid-nineteenth century, but much work remains to be done, not least in interrogating its value as a historical source.⁹ The present article suggests that it has a particular value as a reflection of contemporary African attitudes to the early years of the imperial occupation, and that these views were frequently more critical than has been assumed.

3 Modéran, *Les Maures* provides a thorough overview; Pringle, *Defence of Byzantine Africa*, 9-40 for the narrative.

4 Modéran, *L'Afrique reconquise*.

5 Cameron, *Byzantine Africa*, 4 notes that both *Wars* and *Buildings* have "rightly been taken as basic since modern study of Byzantine Africa began." See also Cameron *Procopius: 171-187*. Kaldellis, *Procopius' Vandal war*, provides a typically provocative discussion of Procopius' African narrative.

6 Diehl, *L'Afrique Byzantine*, uses this material and remains the only book-length study of Byzantine Africa.

7 See the collected papers in Stevens and Conant, *North Africa under Byzantium and Early Islam*.

8 Modéran, *L'Afrique reconquise*; Blaudeau, *Normalisation africaine?*; Dossey, *Exegesis and dissent*.

9 Diggle and Goodyear, *Iohannidos Libri VIII* is the standard edition, and is used here, except where otherwise noted. All translations are my own. See now the editions, commentaries, and translations of Zarini, *Berbères ou barbares* (book II); Tommasi Moreschini, *Iohannidos Liber III* (book III); Goldlust, *Corippe. Johannide, Livre 4* (book IV) and Riedlberger, *Philologischer, historischer und liturgischer Kommentar* (book VIII). Shea, *The Iohannis*, is a translation of the whole work into English, from Diggle and Goodyear. Dideren and Teurfs, *Corippe. La Johannide* provides a complete French translation and short commentary, and Ramirez Tirado, *Coripo. Juánide*, a fine Spanish translation working from the same edition. Important philological studies of the poem include Blänsdorf, *Aeneadas rursus cupiunt*; Costa, *Discorsi ed esempi*; Dorfbauer, *Vergilium imitari*; Ehlers, *Epische Kunst*; Galand-Hallyn, *La Johannide*; Lausberg, *Parcere subiectis*; Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*. The historical value of the *Iohannis* is interrogated more fully in Merrills, *Epic, War and Rebellion*, which further explores several of the arguments in the current article.

The poem, it is argued, represented an African “take” on the imperial presence, which combined a fervent celebration of the recent victories under John with a much less forgiving treatment of the missteps and catastrophes of the previous decade and a half. The overlapping narratives within the *Iohannis* were neither wholly beholden to contemporary chronicle accounts nor to the conventions of epic or panegyric poetry, and thus provide a valuable complement to the treatment of these episodes in our other sources. Existing studies of Corippus’ historical value have tended to focus on particular episodes in his account, and especially those that can be compared directly to Procopius’ treatment of the same events: the loss of Hadrumetum to rebel forces in 544 is the best known of these.¹⁰ More generally, the *Iohannis* has been considered either as a repository of incidental information, most commonly concerning Byzantine military activity and Moorish ethnography, or as a simple manifestation of support for the imperial occupation within Carthage.¹¹ It has also been used extensively as a prosopographical resource.¹² The celebrations of John Troglita’s victories and chauvinistic representations of Moorish barbarism have been widely cited as evidence for Corippus’ essentially Philobyzantine perspective, and the panegyric dimensions of the poem are often identified as its most important feature.¹³ While these approaches have produced rewarding results, they risk neglecting the peculiar value of the poem as a work of war literature, with all that this entails.¹⁴ If we focus on the fact that the *Iohannis* was a response to an extended period of conflict written within – and on behalf of – a community which had been caught up in a decade of bloody struggle, new questions emerge. In this, it shares an ambivalence towards aspects of contemporary imperial power which several recent commentators have plausibly identified in the work of Procopius.¹⁵

Understanding the basic narrative structure of the *Iohannis* is crucial to its appreciation. As Corippus makes clear in his preface, the principal function of the poem was to render the recent campaigns of John Troglita in Virgilian or Homeric terms.¹⁶ The structure of the epic reflects this. Book I describes the suffering of Africa at the hands of the Moors, the emperor Justinian’s decision to despatch John to deal with these problems, and the general’s own journey to North Africa. Book II is concerned with the initial stages of the campaign

10 Gärtner, *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung*, 97-114; Modéran, Corippe et l’occupation byzantine.

11 On the Moors, see esp. Partsch, Die Berbern and Riedmüller, *Die Iohannis des Corippus*, both fine introductions. See also Castronuovo, La visione dei Mauri; Cesa, La pacificazione; Dodi, Corippo poeta della «Romanitas»; Février, Le Maure ambigu; as well as Modéran, *Les Maures*, esp. 27-122. On the military, see Richardot, La pacification; Riedlberger, Recherches onomastiques; Shea, Justinian’s North African strategy.

12 Corippus, *Iohannis IV*, ed. Goldlust, 43. Compare Riedlberger, Recherches onomastiques, and Conant, *Staying Roman*, 196-251.

13 Cameron, Corippus’ *Iohannis*; Ehlers, Epische Kunst, 132; Conant, *Staying Roman*, 252-265; Dodi, La «Iohannis», 592; Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 21-25; Tommasi Moreschini, *Realtà della storia*, 161-169; Vössing, Africa zwischen Vandalen, Mauren und Byzantinern, 202; Riedlberger, *Philologischer, historischer und liturgischer Kommentar*, 90-95 offers an important challenge to the assumption that the work was essentially “propaganda”, but does not interrogate its bleaker passages closely.

14 Caramico, Corippo (o Gorippo) poeta della guerra, approaches this topic through a rewarding discussion of the horrific and hypertrophic violence of Corippus’ account. This study and the wider reflections of Fussell, *Great War and Modern Memory* and especially Osgood, *Caesar’s Legacy* have shaped my own reading of the poem considerably. Kern, Non ignota cano is an important interpretation of the *Iohannis* as a work of social memory, but reaches rather different conclusions on the function of the text from those proposed here.

15 See esp. Kaldellis, Procopius’ Vandal War, with references.

16 Corippus, *Iohannis*, Praef. 7-16, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 1.

and includes the Moorish order of battle for the conflict (which eventually takes place in Book V). There is reason to think that the first two books of the *Iohannis* were originally performed in public, either as part of the triumph which commemorated John's eventual victory, or as part of the general celebrations that followed, and they certainly form a distinct unit of composition.¹⁷ The remainder of the epic built upon these foundations and was probably also intended for an African audience, even if it was primarily circulated in written form. Book III and the first part of Book IV are then dominated by a substantial historical digression, in which the events leading up to the campaign of 546 are narrated in the voice of an African officer named Liberatus (who is also referred to as Caecilides).¹⁸ This digression, ostensibly addressed to John himself, covers the birth, youth, and adulthood of his Moorish antagonist Antalas, the collapse of the Vandal kingdom, and the mixed fortunes of the early Byzantine occupation, and blends moments of idealized peace with some quite grim lamentations on the subjects of plague and war. It is followed by two short recapitulations of the same events, first in the voice of the Moorish leader Antalas, as reported by a Roman envoy, which laments the political infidelity of the imperial administration and the impossibility of peace, and then in the words of John Troglita himself, as he makes sense of what he has heard.¹⁹ The epic then returns to the events of the later 540s. The second part of Book IV includes the Byzantine order of battle, followed in Book V by a long account of the first battle between the opposing forces near Antonia Castra, at which John is victorious.²⁰ Book VI deals first with the premature triumphal celebrations of the Romans, and then with the resumption of conflict under a new Moorish leader, Carcasan. John leads his troops south to Tripolitania, where, weakened by heat and thirst, they are eventually defeated. Books VII and VIII then recount the reorganization of the imperial army and its final conflict with the Moors on the so-called "Plains of Cato", probably in the south of Byzacena.²¹ In its present form, Book VIII (and hence the epic as a whole) is unfinished, but the successful resolution of this climactic battle is not in doubt.²²

Corippus deploys three basic narratological modes in his treatment of this material, and an understanding of the differences between these is crucial to our understanding of the work's historiographical resonances.²³ In each of the three, the poet expresses a different sentiment towards the imperial occupation, and the shifts between them allow him to offer a more rounded reflection on contemporary attitudes. The first appears in the preface in

17 Blänsdorf, *Aeneadas rursus cupiunt*; Burck, *Das Römische Epos*, 384-385.

18 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.54-IV.246, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 49-76. Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 111.

19 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.358-392, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 80-82; IV.407-456, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 82-84.

20 Corippus, *Iohannis*, I.462, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 21 (*Antonia castra*). The identification is unclear.

21 Corippus, *Iohannis*, VIII.166, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 171 (*Campi Catonis*). The precise location of this battle is not known. Cf. Riedlberger, *Philologischer, historischer und liturgischer Kommentar*, 213-214 for a survey of interpretations, and discussion of the possible allusion to Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, IX.371-949 ed. and trans. Duff, 532-574.

22 Riedlberger, *Philologischer, historischer und liturgischer Kommentar*; Mantke, *Über den verlorenen Schluß*, on the ending of the poem.

23 On the narrative structures, see Hajdú, *Corippus' attempt*, and esp. Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*.

his direct address to the *proceres* (noblemen) of Carthage, where the voice of the narrator/poet is heard directly, often in apostrophe to God, Justinian, or the Muses.²⁴ This authorial voice recurs occasionally throughout the poem, most commonly to express lamentation at the failure of imperial forces, dismay at the pagan folly of the Moors, or frustration at the difficulty of rendering the narrative (and its awkward barbarian names) in verse.²⁵

The second mode that dominates the bulk of the narrative is an impersonal, omniscient voice directed to the audience of the poem (at least nominally the same *proceres* who are introduced at the outset). This is a conventional form of epic narrative, and its presentation of material is shaped accordingly: battles are presented as a succession of individual combats or *aristeiae*, landscapes are rendered in Virgilian language, Moorish soothsayers are painted in the indelible colours of demonic oracles, and so on.²⁶ For the most part, the poet paints his protagonists in stark terms, emphasizing the piety of the Byzantines and the barbaric paganism of the Moors, although the prominence in the narrative of the allied Moorish federates under their leader Cusina complicate these oppositions significantly.²⁷ Yet the implications of this rendering of historical events in epic language are noteworthy. Few late antique poets before Corippus had attempted to interpret very recent events in a purely epic mode, and even in earlier periods, such a combination of epic and history was unusual: the *Iohannis* thus broke some new literary ground.²⁸ Its closest late Latin analogues are the panegyric epyllia written by Claudian at the end of the fourth century, and similar elements feature in these sections of the *Iohannis*, but these works are much shorter and more focused than Corippus' grand project.²⁹ The immediate audience of this epic would certainly have been familiar with the basic outline of the episodes that he described, whether from official channels of communication or otherwise: as the poet himself declares, "I sing of things that are not unknown".³⁰ But the epic itself would still have represented a very early "drafting" of history. In the absence of a single authoritative version of that "history" – and in conjunction with other forms of representation – Corippus' poem may thus have helped to shape contemporary understanding of the very recent past. Even if its generic conventions make the sifting of historical "facts" out of Corippus' account an immensely difficult business, as generations of modern historians have discovered, the poet's own historiographical processes are vital to understanding the structure and purpose of his work.³¹

24 Corippus, *Iohannis, Praef* ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 1–2. On the prefatory voice in late antique poetry, see esp. Pelttari, *Space that Remains*, 45–72.

25 Cf. for example Corippus, *Iohannis*, I.23–26; II.23–27; VIII.507–509, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 4, 26–27, 184. Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*, 76–77 for discussion and further examples.

26 Blänsdorf, *Aeneadas rursus cupiunt*; Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*, 82–91.

27 Merrills, *Epic, War and Rebellion*, chapter 4 interrogates Corippus' ethnography (which is more subtle than is often assumed).

28 Eusebius' lost epic on Gainas alluded to by Socrates Scholasticus (Agathias, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.6, ed. Keydell) may be one exception, but there is no reason to think that Corippus knew of this work. I am grateful to Robin Whelan for this reference. George of Pisidia provides a further Greek comparandum, from the early seventh century. On which, see Howard-Johnstone, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, 16–35. On earlier epics on recent events, see Leigh, *Epic and historiography at Rome*, 995.

29 Schindler, *Spätantike Geschichtsschreibung*, 227–273 and cf. her full exploration of the genre in Schindler, *Per carmina laudes*, esp. 1–57.

30 Corippus, *Iohannis*, VII.397, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 159: *non ignota cano*. Cf. Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*, 63.

31 Cf. Burck, *Das Römische Epos 394–397* and Charlet, *Aesthetic trends*, on the same problem with Claudian.

It is, however, the third narrative mode deployed in the *Iohannis* that is perhaps the most significant for our purposes, and as such demands particularly careful scrutiny. The long historical analepsis that occupies much of books III-IV, and which considers the events that had taken place in North Africa from around 500 to John's arrival in 546, is presented as the direct speech of the subaltern Liberatus, rather than in the impersonal voice affected in the main body of the epic. This digression is addressed to John Troglita and his immediate entourage, and Corippus briefly outlines the responses of this audience at the close of the section.³² Liberatus is explicitly identified as an African in origin, and it is this background which gives his account its authority: he speaks of the sufferings of "our" region over the previous years, and he is subsequently accorded a role in the fighting that follows.³³ In the narratological terminology of Genette, this digression is intradiegetic and homodiegetic: that is, it is a narrative contained within the wider story, and is recounted by a character who is himself a participant in the events that he describes.³⁴ Yet while Liberatus' digression was nominally addressed to John Troglita and his officers, who were unfamiliar with the events narrated, the digression was of course functionally part of the epic as a whole; that is to say, the historical audience of the *Iohannis* would have been all too familiar with the trials and tribulations that are recounted here. Liberatus' allusion to the particular sufferings of the *Sidonios patres* ("Carthaginian fathers") within his digression is perhaps an acknowledgement of this very audience.³⁵ If the bulk of the *Iohannis* rendered very recent (and perhaps unfamiliar) history in the stylized language of epic, therefore, the "flashback" of books III-IV recounted events that the poem's audience knew well and had lived through themselves. This distinction – and the contrast in tone between the two modes – is crucial.³⁶

Liberatus' digression had important literary functions within the structure of the epic. Its clear antecedent is Aeneas' long narrative of the final destruction of Troy in *Aeneid* II-III; indeed, Virgil's account is the only analepsis in Latin epic that is longer than Corippus' digression.³⁷ Each passage occurs at a similar point in its epic, and each succinctly provides the narrative context for the events to follow. Like Aeneas, Liberatus is an affecting narrator, who frequently interjects to lament the suffering that he has witnessed. Although Liberatus' long description of the Moorish oracle does not find a direct parallel in Aeneas' digression, its other Virgilian and Lucanian antecedents are clear enough.³⁸ As several important studies have shown, moreover, individual elements in Liberatus' account also anticipate the

32 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.1-51; IV.247-255, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 47-49; 76.

33 His African identity is repeatedly stressed: Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.50, 65, and *passim*, VII.398, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 49, 159. Martindale, 'Liberatus' assumes without comment that Liberatus was a historical figure.

34 Genette, *Narrative Discourse*; De Jong, *Narratology and Classics*, is an invaluable introduction. On Corippus, cf. *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini 113.

35 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.280, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 58. Cf. Zarini, *Berbères ou barbares?*, 10, and *Iohannis*, VI.63, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 115. Kern, *Non ignota cano*, 98-99.

36 Pace Gärtner, *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung*, 100 who argues for a slippage between "Liberatus" and "Corippus" as narratorial voices.

37 Virgil, *Aeneid*, II.3-III.715, ed. and trans. Fairclough and Goold, I.294-394. Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 113-114; Corippus, *Iohannis IV*, ed. Goldlust, 33. The echo is obvious. Cf. Blänsdorf, *Aeneadas rursus cupiunt*, 535; Ehlers, *Epische Kunst*, 118-119; Dorfbauer, *Vergilium imitari*, 206-212.

38 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.107-140, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 51-52. Most obviously the prophecy of Erictho in Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, VI.588-820 ed. and trans. Duff, 346-364. For discussion, see Corippus, *Iohannis, III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 127-129; Galand-Hallyn, *La Johannide*, 81-82.

narrative ambitions of the *Iohannis* as a whole. The account of Antalas' upbringing which opens the digression may be read as a counterpoint to the description of John's earlier career in Book I.³⁹ The battles within the digression, first between Antalas and an ill-fated Vandal army, and then between the rebel Stutias and the imperial forces under John, son of Sisiniolus, both anticipate the battle sequences of the latter part of the *Iohannis*. In many ways, this John stands in for his namesake in this section, and his heroic death in battle associates John Troglita with the epic glories of self-sacrifice, which he could not otherwise achieve.⁴⁰ It is certainly possible, therefore, to read (and appreciate) Liberatus' digression for its purely literary function, as an integral component of a wider epic narrative.

Yet the structural connections between Liberatus' digression and the epic of which it forms part should not disguise the striking shift in content and tone between this section of the poem and the rest. While other parts of the *Iohannis* blend epic and panegyric elements through the celebration of Justinian and his general John, this is not the case in the flashback of books III and IV. Neither the emperor nor John Troglita features prominently within this digression, and Liberatus' position as narrator further liberates the poet from the tone of celebration apparent elsewhere. While aspects of the early Byzantine occupation – including the decade of imperial peace which followed Belisarius' invasion – are certainly praised within this section, these are scarcely an uncritical *laus Africae*, as is sometimes asserted, and indeed, for much of the passage the tone is much bleaker.⁴¹ Whereas elsewhere in the *Iohannis* Corippus is content to present Byzantine military leadership as essentially faultless, the same is emphatically not true of the cavalcade of incompetence presented by Liberatus.⁴² For most of the epic, moreover, it is the pagan Moors who act as antagonists, but this is much less obvious in the digression of books III–IV. Although Liberatus' account begins with the birth of the Moorish leader Antalas and the demonic prophecies associated with him, his role as the principal agent of African suffering is soon usurped by the Roman mutineer Stutias, while the latter stages of the digression recount the sufferings caused by political and military convulsions within the administration itself. While this contrast may be partially explained as a literary conceit in its own right – a succession of inept commanders paving the way for future salvation under John – it is as well to remember that the audience of the *Iohannis* had themselves lived through the difficult years being described.⁴³ The bleak digression, in other words, represents an important reflection on the recent past written by a North African, for a North African audience, and presented in the voice of an African narrator. Elsewhere in the epic, Corippus may have been concerned to inflect his treatment of the recent past with panegyric elements; in the digression of books III and IV, however, the deployment of a lachrymose spokesman freed him of some of these concerns, enabling him to present an alternative experience of empire.

39 Corippus, *Iohannis*, I.48-109, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 5-7.

40 Thus Ehlers, *Epische Kunst*, 117-132; Dorfbauer, *Vergilium imitari*, 210-212; Corippus, *Iohannis IV*, ed. Goldlust, 15.

41 Cameron, *Byzantine Africa*, 16: "In all of this Corippus ... tailors the story even more to the Byzantine side. He was consciously writing not only to please the Byzantine rulers, but to persuade the local population of the Byzantine case[.]"

42 Cf. Cameron, *Byzantine Africa*, 16: "No blame is attached to Byzantine policy, of course, and the mismanagement of the army is totally ignored..." "The Byzantine cause is presented in unambiguous terms of virtue and piety..."; Cameron, *Procopius*, 178. "[Procopius and Corippus] do their best to pass over the more deep-seated problem and suggest that all was well in the best possible world, even if there were a few small military difficulties."

43 Thus Dorfbauer, *Vergilium imitari*, 208-209 and Corippus, *Iohannis IV*, ed. Goldlust, 45. Cf. Zarini, *Rhétorique, poétique, spiritualité*, 23-24.

Ultimately, our reading of Liberatus' digression, and our understanding of its immediate reception, must be informed by the succession of military and political catastrophes that had hit North Africa over the previous two decades.⁴⁴ The impact of the Three Chapters schism on the region is well known, and it has been suggested that Corippus' poem was intended to distract from this gathering crisis, but this was scarcely the only problem that Africans had faced.⁴⁵ The audience of Corippus' poem had lived through three major mutinies in a decade and a half, and had witnessed more than half of the African garrison rise in revolt against the imperial throne.⁴⁶ The latest of these sorry episodes had taken place as recently as Winter 545/546 – mere months before John Troglita's arrival, and probably less than five years before the composition and performance of the *Iohannis* itself. The details of the uprising are known from Procopius' *Wars*, and it was one of the few African episodes to be included in the accounts of several contemporary chroniclers.⁴⁷ Corippus, too, deals with the episode directly, albeit in terms which disguise the culpability of several key figures, as shall be discussed below. In the course of that uprising, the *dux Numidiae* Guntharith, one of the highest-ranking officers in the army of occupation, had murdered the magister militum Areobindus and had won the support – however temporarily – of the inner circle of imperial administrators. At different stages, this tyranny seems to have been supported by the praetorian prefect Athanasius; Artabanes, an Armenian commander who was later to take supreme command of the African army; Cusina, the most important Moorish ally of the Romans in the period after 546; and the archbishop of Carthage, Reparatus. Guntharith's unhappy supremacy proved short-lived, and the Carthaginian establishment swiftly returned to the imperial fold, but the aftershocks of this upheaval and the bloodshed it brought to the streets of the city can hardly have been quickly forgotten. Yet this was merely the latest in several cycles of intestine conflict across the region, and there is good reason to think that the citizens of Africa viewed imperial troops as agents of instability as much as guardians of the peace. Forced requisitioning seems to have been widespread and resented, and images of a rapacious soldiery can be detected in moralizing treatises of the period and perhaps even poetic satire, as well as in legislation designed to stop it.⁴⁸ Pressure from Moorish "barbarians" created further problems on top of this but was probably as much a product as a cause of this internecine fighting. As if this were not enough, 536-537 also saw the start of an epochal cold snap across the Mediterranean, and even if this may not have affected North Africa directly, the onset of plague from 543 certainly did, as we shall see.⁴⁹ Corippus does not ignore this background, but has Liberatus treat all of this sad history in varying degrees of detail with his digression; in doing so he provides an invaluable original narrative of the early occupation, albeit one which has to be read with some care.

44 Cameron, *Byzantine Africa*, 16 notes this grim context, but regards Liberatus' treatment as a positive "spin".

45 Cameron, *Byzantine Africa*, 17-20; Cameron, *Corippus' Iohannis*, 171; Tommasi Moreschini, *Between dissent and praise*.

46 Kaegi, *Byzantine Military Unrest*, 47-49.

47 Procopius, *Vandal War*, II.25.1-II.28.41, ed. and trans. Dewing, II.420-456; Marcellinus Comes *Chronicon*, Add. a.547.6, ed. Croke, 51; Victor Tunnunensis, *Chronica*, a.546, ed. Placanica, 48; Jordanes, *Romana*, a.384, ed. Mommsen, 51.

48 On this, see Merrills, *The Byzantine period*; Merrills, *Contested identities*.

49 See Newfield, *Mysterious and mortiferous clouds*, and the discussion below.

Historical Aspects of Liberatus' Digression

The historical complexities of Liberatus' digression are made clear from the outset. In introducing the narrator's task, a Roman officer called Gentius describes the origins of the war as "concealed from us, buried away in hidden obscurity".⁵⁰ The complexity of unearthing this context explains the length of the digression: this is not simply to be the recounting of the rise of a barbarian antagonist, but a tangled sequence of events and circumstances, whose connections are not always clear. The digression itself opens with the statement that "Africa first suffered twinned plagues, and now, wretched once more, it suffers twinned ruin again".⁵¹ From the context, it is likely that the narrator is referring in the first case to the coincidence of the emergence of the Moorish leader Antalas and the coup and subsequent tyranny of the Vandal king Gelimer after 530, although this is never stated explicitly.⁵² Instead, the ambiguity of this statement is probably deliberate; the poet (or narrator) intended its implications to change over the course of the digression as a whole.⁵³ By IV.99, the *geminas ... pestes* of the opening address has given way to the *geminas ... partes* of an imperial administration divided against itself. Here, the narrative is concerned with "the division of the *res publica* into twinned parts" rather than with the machinations of external barbarians, and Corippus tellingly alludes to Romulus' murder of Remus.⁵⁴ Equally, of course, the use of *pestes* (plagues) in the opening metaphor inevitably recalls the literal plague which had struck Africa in 543 and which Liberatus goes on to describe in some detail. From the outset then, Liberatus' is a subtle historical treatment and one which does not present a consistent message about the nature of the threat facing Africa, or the causes of its decline, but rather entangles these together. Some brief discussion of particular episodes discussed within the digression may help to demonstrate this point.

1. Golden Age

Liberatus' digression does include some celebration of the imperial presence, as almost all modern commentators have noted, but this is perhaps less emphatic than has commonly been asserted. The narrator seems to recall a golden age for African society, which had been lost in the face of Moorish attacks. Indeed, it is this which serves as the prompt for the digression in the first place. John Troglita wonders at the contrast between the present state of the region and the territories that he left following his first period of service in the country in the mid-530s:

When I left, Libya was fruitful and cultivated; on my parting it remained in the condition proper to it; if not even better, as I recall: fertile, overflowing in crops, producing the fruit of the light-giving olive, and the juice of happy Bacchus. A profound peace was in that place. But what madness of war, what fury set these unhappy fields ablaze?⁵⁵

50 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.46, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 48: *nos latet, abstrusis penitus contexta latebris*.

51 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.63-64, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 49: *principio geminas iam senserat Africa pestes: / nunc iterum geminas sentit miseranda ruinas*. Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid*, XII.845, ed. and trans. Fairclough and Goold, 358.

52 Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 116-117.

53 Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 116-117.

54 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.99, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 69: *diuiditur geminas inter res publica partes* (my translation).

55 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.29-34, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 48.

This is more or less the line taken by contemporary imperial media, and the one we might expect to be voiced by a Roman commander. In the Spring of 535, Justinian's Edicts for the administration of Africa had exulted in the liberation of the province after a century of Vandal captivity, and assertions of peace and bounty across the region were commonplace in imperial legislation over the following decade.⁵⁶ Although John says nothing of the Arianism of the Vandals, the suppression of which was a dominant theme of the ideology of "re"conquest, this silence is probably to be explained by Corippus' own reticence on sectarian issues, and perhaps to the indifference of an African audience in the 550s to a religious dispute that was less relevant to them than it had been to their parents two decades earlier.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the poet's account of restored fertility, and the themes of Vandal tyranny, and the century of suffering are familiar enough.

Corippus has Liberatus echo this language in a much-quoted passage of his digression:

Everything was prosperous, and there was a secure peace through the whole of Libya. In those days Ceres was fruitful, the vine blessed with grapes, and the colourful tree sparkled with jewelled olives. The farmer had begun to plant his new crops everywhere, led out his yoked oxen and rejoicing ploughed his fields as he sang a peaceful song from the hillside. And every happy traveller dared to sing to the moon.⁵⁸

While this ostensible *laus Africae* has an important function within Liberatus' account, the straightforward celebration of the imperial presence is scarcely the dominant theme of his speech. In total, this topic occupies only around 60 lines of the digression, approximately the same amount of space that is given over to the description of the plague of 543 and its chaotic aftermath.⁵⁹ This contrasts with the 120 lines devoted to the rise of Antalas, and the 90 lines concerned with the collapse of the Vandal kingdom.⁶⁰ But most strikingly of all, Liberatus spends five times as many lines – over 300 – on the military conflicts of the early 540s compared with the glories of imperial renewal, and he presents these struggles as the result of mutiny and imperial incompetence as much as Moorish pressure.⁶¹

56 *Codex Justinianus*, I.27.1, 2 ed. Frier, I. 314-340; cf. *Novellae Justinianae*, 8.10.2; 30.11.2; 36; 37; App 2. trans. Miller and Sarris, 138, 331, 349-351, 353-357, 1107-1108. This ideology was manifested most directly in the triumphal celebrations of 534, on which, see Procopius, *Vandal War*, II.9.1-15, ed. and trans. Dewing, II.278-83 with the comments of Börm, Justinians Triumph und Belisars Erniedrigung and Meier, *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians*, 150-60. On the commemoration in the visual art of the capital, see also Procopius, *Buildings*, I.10.16, ed. and trans. Dewing, VII.82-5.

57 I am grateful to Robin Whelan for this point.

58 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.323-330, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 59-60 [following their line ordering].

59 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.277-339, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 57-60 (*laus*) (and note the comments below about the implicit themes even of this *laus*); Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.343-400, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 60-62 (plague and aftermath).

60 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.63-182, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 49-54 (Antalas) and 184-277 ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 54-57 (Vandal decline).

61 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.401-IV.242, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 62-75.

Equally importantly, Liberatus' praise of this lost idyll was neither limited to the aftermath of the imperial occupation of 533, nor wholly unambiguous in its celebration of peace; both of these factors complicate the superficially coherent relationship between the account of the early occupation within the digression and contemporary imperial ideology. Strikingly, Liberatus' valediction looks back not just beyond Belisarius' invasion, but as far as the later Vandal period that preceded the military upheaval of 530:

In earlier times a peace was secure through all of the lands of Libya. Wretched Africa rejoiced in new crowns. Farmers bound their haystacks with golden grain, Bacchus reddened as ever on the young vine, and shining peace ornamented her land with olive trees.⁶²

Liberatus narrates how this idyll was then shattered by the rise of Antalas and the internal collapse of the Vandal kingdom:

The fierce brigand raged: nowhere was life safe. We were oppressed, at the mercy of unjust fates. And as the Vandal kingdom perished, so too did our own happiness.⁶³

As Peter Riedlberger has noted, if Liberatus' digression reflected contemporary propaganda, then an important theme within it would have been that the later Vandal period was not so bad after all, which is hardly reflected in any of our other sources.⁶⁴ Admittedly, the narrative offered by the *Iohannis* of the chaotic period from c.529-535 is frequently confusing: Vandal names are garbled, and battle sequences seem to owe more to literary convention than to historical memory.⁶⁵ Yet its broad outlines contrast sharply with the consistent message from the imperial administration that treated the occupation of 533 as a moment of salvation for the region, and the Vandals as abject heretics.⁶⁶ Whereas other writers of the imperial period were keen to distance themselves from the Vandal past, especially in the first years of the occupation, Corippus (or Liberatus) reveals no such compulsion.⁶⁷ While imperial power does offer a brief respite, the moment of "liberation" itself is not accorded any particular significance, which might seem a noteworthy omission in the light of the nominal audience of the digression.⁶⁸ There is nothing here of the rhetoric of "Roman" restoration implied

62 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.67-72, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 49.

63 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.194-196, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 54.

64 Riedlberger, *Philologischer, historischer und liturgischer Kommentar*, 94.

65 Onesti, *I Vandali*, 163; Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 186-196; Gärtner, *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung*, 66-78; Merrills, Gelimer's slaughter.

66 Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 186-188 argues that Corippus' treatment of the later Vandal period may reflect Justinian's political sympathy for the deposed Hilderic, and thus follow an imperial line. The confusion over the prosopography in the poem and the absence of any reference to the imperial *casus belli* complicate this argument. On other responses to the Vandal past, see esp. Merrills and Miles, *The Vandals*, 228-255; Steinacher, *Die Vandalen*, 310-313.

67 Merrills, Contested identities for further discussion.

68 Pace Cameron, Corippus' *Iohannis*, 40: "Naturally he praises to the skies the effects of the reconquest".

in Belisarius' ceremonies, in Justinian's legislation, or indeed in the thanksgiving of the African church council of 535.⁶⁹ When Liberatus looked back to a past golden age, in other words, this included the happy years of the 520s, and was not the specific creation of a benevolent imperial state. One suspects this may betray a widespread sentiment among his audience.⁷⁰

Equally important, Liberatus implies the peace won by Byzantine arms was only ever provisional, and that it contained within it the seeds of its own destruction. Thus, the "ten years of peace" that are lauded in III.283-313, and which presumably refer to the decade between the invasion of 533 and the plague of 543, include several references to rebellion and civil war.⁷¹ All of these were, admittedly, suppressed relatively swiftly in Liberatus' telling, but they still carry an ominous note for the future (this in the sixty lines supposedly devoted to "peaceful" Africa):

Stutias, who had been one of ours, started the conflict. What fury was his, what wrath, and what a repugnant duty fell to our otherwise loyal command! And so the civil war was revived, and Carthage with her treaty broken, suffered cruel plundering and abominable danger in a one-sided war.⁷²

Liberatus' later celebration of the restoration of order is also couched in terms of the suppression of violence, as much as the outright return of peace:

Neither war, nor rapacious brigand, nor greedy soldier threatened our rustic homes; their furnishings tempted no-one, and the innocent soldier was content with his own lot.⁷³

In this telling, African peace is manifested not simply in the placidity of the barbarians, but in the restriction of all soldiers to their proper place. This will recur as an important theme in the second half of Liberatus' digression, as we shall see.

2. Plague

The treatment of the Justinianic plague at III. 343-400 is also noteworthy. The plague itself emerged in the Mediterranean during the early 540s, spread relatively rapidly, and lingered for at least a generation, sporadically flaring up into the seventh century.⁷⁴ While scholars remain divided on the demographic and economic impact of the plague, there can be little doubt that where it did strike, it struck hard.⁷⁵ Outside the *Iohannis*, even so, our evidence for its initial impact in Africa is slight: the chronicler Victor of Tunnuna, himself a native

69 *Collectio Avellana* 85, ed. Günther, 328-330.

70 Cf. Cesa, *La pacificazione*, 85-86.

71 Cameron, *Corippus' Iohannis*, 40 notes this, while arguing that Liberatus emphasizes the speed with which the revolts were crushed. This is true, but the material remains conspicuous in a celebration of Roman peace.

72 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.305-309, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 59.

73 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.320-326, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 59. On the line ordering here, compare Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moeschini, 252-253.

74 Harper, *The Fate of Rome*, 199-245; Meier, 'The Justinianic plague'; Mordechai and Eisenberg, *Rejecting catastrophe*.

75 Sessa, *The new environmental fall of Rome*, is a measured discussion which highlights many of the methodological weaknesses of current scholarship.

of the region, states that “all of the regions of the world” were beset by afflictions of the groin in 542, which presumably included his homeland, and Zachariah Rhetor lists Africa among the regions affected.⁷⁶ Jean Durliat has also suggested that a small cluster of funerary inscriptions in Sufetula dated to early 543 might be evidence of an outbreak there, but none of this epigraphy mentions the plague directly, and the evidence remains circumstantial.⁷⁷ Nor is there any clear evidence for economic dislocation in the aftermath of the plague in Africa.⁷⁸

The account in the *Iohannis* nevertheless shows that the plague was vividly remembered in Carthage a decade later. In the first part of Liberatus' account, the suffering and lamentation are emphasized: “There was no terror now of bitter death.”⁷⁹ But the emphasis in the latter part of the digression on the social upheaval that came with it is equally striking. Here, the poet refers to suppressed mourning, and the abandonment of legal patterns of inheritance:

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.⁸⁰

Corippus' account of the plague draws variously on the famous plague passage of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, as well as sections of Virgil, Ovid, and Lucan, as Chiara Tommasi Moreschini has shown.⁸¹ But what is most remarkable in Corippus' treatment is less his deference to these familiar sources than his willingness to deviate from them. While the poet was perfectly happy to underscore his classical inspirations with a heavy hand in the main narrative of his poem – at one point, for example, John Troglita compares himself directly to Lucan's Cato when journeying into the desert of Tripolitania – the same is not the case here.⁸² Indeed, Corippus' account of the plague is much less dependent on literary antecedents than is Procopius' reworking of Thucydides, for example.⁸³ While the pathology of plague had become a poetic *topos* after Lucretius, Corippus ignores that macabre aspect, dwelling at far greater length on the upheaval that followed the disease rather than the pestilence itself.⁸⁴ What he has Liberatus recount is not the resurfacing of a familiar poetic nemesis, therefore, but the messy, confusing, and dispiriting social collapse which followed in its wake. This is not to imply that the resulting passage is without literary affectation, but the refusal to invoke straightforward poetic models may betray the poet's overriding concern to reflect contemporary sentiment. Epidemic diseases, regardless of their mortality rate, might have lingering social effects long after the first wave of the pestilence had passed.⁸⁵ Viewed in these terms, Corippus did not include the plague merely as a device to set the stage for Antalas' later mobilization, but as a sincere reflection on a shared and protracted experience of collective anxiety across Africa.

76 Victor Tunnunensis, *Chronica*, a.542.2, ed. Placanica, 46; Ps. Zachariah Rhetor, *Chronicle X.9a*, ed. Greatrex et al., 414-415.

77 Durliat, *La peste*, 108 and cf. Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence*, 292-293.

78 Reynolds, *From Vandal Africa*, surveys the territory.

79 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.351-352, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 61.

80 Corippus, *Iohannis*, III.376-379, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 62.

81 Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 255-256.

82 Corippus, *Iohannis*, VI.339-341, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 126.

83 Procopius, *Persian War*, II.22-23, ed and trans. Dewing, I.450-472; cf. Thucydides, *Historia*, II.47-54, ed and trans. Smith, II.340-356.

84 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, VI.1138-1286 ed. and trans. Rouse and Smith, 578-590.

85 For a very recent point of comparison, see Vulliamy, *Will Covid change Italy?*

3. Wars Worse than Civil

Liberatus' account is equally remarkable for its unforgiving account of the continued bungling of Byzantine soldiers and administrators in the aftermath of the occupation, particularly in the difficult years of the 540s. There are heroic moments in this part of the digression, to be sure, and there are certainly passages where the poet was evidently concerned to present the actions of certain individuals in a positive light, but the overall tone is hardly the imperialistic whitewash that is sometimes implied in modern scholarship. Although the succession of military catastrophes in the aftermath of the plague is initially ascribed to Antalas, for example, the Roman rebel Stutias rapidly assumed a central role in the narrative, and the Moorish leader is almost entirely eclipsed in the latter parts of the digression. Significantly, Guntharith's uprising in the winter of 545/546 is also recounted at some length and is the last significant episode within the analepsis.

Behold once more, Guntharith, with twisted intentions – that evil, deceitful, cursed, dreadful, ill-fated adulterer, bandit, murderer, rapist and foulest agent of war – attacked our unsuspecting commander with his cruel arms, taking him captive with trickery and falsely swearing oaths. He was not moved by any reverence for the emperor, nor was he afraid to wage war or assume the name of tyrant.⁸⁶

The means by which Guntharith was overthrown was a contested issue in the period that followed. Liberatus' narrative accords a central role to the prefect Athanasius in the usurper's defeat and suggests that the magister militum Artabanes (named here only as "the Armenian") was merely an agent of that official.⁸⁷ He includes nothing on the complicity of either figure in the tyranny itself and is similarly silent on the similar role of the Carthaginian bishop Reparatus. By contrast, Procopius gives Artabanes a much more prominent position in the counter-coup, but it is clear from his narrative that all of these figures had been complicit in the unfolding tyranny, and this can hardly have been forgotten in Carthage only months later.⁸⁸ While Liberatus' analepsis thus represents a rather sanitized account of the recent past, the episode is scarcely swept under the carpet within the *Iohannis* as a whole. As we shall see, the poet twice returns to the aftermath of Guntharith's coup within the epic, first from the perspective of the Moorish leader Antalas (who could claim an agency of his own in the imperial victory), and then in the synthetic overview of John Troglita himself.⁸⁹ While Corippus shaped Liberatus' account to maintain a tactful silence on some details of the recent past, then, this should not be read as a ringing endorsement of imperial government.

86 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.222-228, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 75.

87 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.232-242, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 75. *Armenius* at IV.236. Gärtner, *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung*, 65 and 89. Corippus, *Iohannis IV*, ed. Goldlust, 44.

88 Procopius, *Vandal War*, II.25.1-28.34, ed and trans. Dewing, II.420-455,

89 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.358-392, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 80-82; IV.407-456, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 82-84 with the discussion below.

This point is made still clearer by the themes of internecine war elsewhere in the digression. Most contemporary historical accounts agree that the military chaos in North Africa was caused primarily by mutiny and rebellion within the Byzantine army, rather than the external threat of the Moors, but Liberatus' recognition of these failings is all the more interesting for being placed in the mouth of a North African.⁹⁰ In the aftermath of Solomon's death, the condemnation of imperial administrative incompetence is blistering. After hailing the false hope generated by the arrival of Areobindus' relief fleet in 545 – “the sea glittered with Areobindus' prows” – Liberatus is caustic about the clumsy power-sharing arrangement with the commander Sergius that ensued.⁹¹ He states explicitly that Areobindus' arrival created still greater problems for Africa and turns to the foundational myth of Rome to make his point:

When the world was still uncivilized, and producing only meagre crops, it could not support two leaders, and nor could Rome, the greatest of realms, which consecrated its first walls with its own blood.⁹²

These tropes of civil war recur throughout the second half of Liberatus' digression. The defeated Stutias explicitly compares himself to Catiline, and widespread use is made of the unsettling imagery of a world divided against itself.⁹³ Corippus refers to “Kindred breasts ... attacked and guts spilled by kindred hands”, in a passage which directly recalls the grotesque language of the Moorish oracle earlier in his digression.⁹⁴ If the digression as a whole followed Virgilian precedent, the bloody, brutal tone of his successor Lucan seems much clearer here.

In particular, the internal collapse of imperial society in Africa is emphasized by the voice of Liberatus himself in his account of the fall of Hadrumetum to the rebels in 544 or 545. This is one of the few specific episodes in the narrative, which is directly paralleled in Procopius' account, and one at which Liberatus himself claimed to have been present.⁹⁵ What is particularly noteworthy here, however, is how this allows the third-person perspective adopted elsewhere in the digression to give way to a first-person account of the officer's own surrender, having been trapped by the rebels' skulduggery:

90 Procopius' account in *Wars IV* is largely concerned with internal conflict, a point demonstrated by the brief summary in Agathias, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, Poem 25, ed. Keydell; trans. Frendo, 7. Cf. also Victor Tunnunensis, *Chronica*, a.541.2, 543, 545, 546.2, ed. Placanica, 44, 46, 48; Marcellinus Comes *Chronicon*, Add. a.537.3; a.539.5; a.541.3; a.543.3, a.545.2, 546.3, ed. Croke, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51; Jordanes, *Romana*, 384, ed. Mommsen, 51.

91 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.83, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 69. Areobindus' fleet may have been very small: cf. Procopius, *Vandal War*, II.24.1, ed. and trans. Dewing, II.416; Marcellinus Comes *Chronicon*, Add a.546.3, ed. Croke, 51; Victor Tunnunensis, *Chronica* a.546, ed. Placanica, 48; and Martindale, Areobindus 2.

92 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.94-96, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 69.

93 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.205-218, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 74.

94 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.106-107, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 70; cf. *Iohannis* III.92, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 50 and Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, V.175 ed. and trans. Duff, 250. On this, see Corippus, *Iohannis IV*, ed. Goldlust, 148.

95 Cf. Procopius, *Vandal War*, II.23.10-25, ed. and trans. Dewing, II.408-414; Gärtner, *Untersuchungen zur Gestaltung*, 97-112; Modéran, Corippe et l'occupation byzantine.

Overcome by fear, the men threw down their spears, flung themselves at the tyrant's knees and hailed him with friendly words. There was no salvation from their officers. What else can I say? We asked for mercy; it was given at once. We asked the enemy to swear on their lives; they did so. Compelled, we pretended that we would follow the infamous tyrants. Thus, the city of Justinian was handed over to the savage Moors, and left to an uncertain fate.⁹⁶

Liberatus himself was blameless in this episode: in due course he effected his escape from the captured city, and he subsequently describes its recovery by loyal troops. But the personal voice assumed in the retelling of this episode underscores the collective breakdown that was afflicting the Byzantine army of the 540s. The same approach lends additional drama to the account of the subsequent battle at which Stutias and Solomon are killed, in a conflict unambiguously presented as a civil war:

A Roman troop – not our own – followed these rebels. Then once more the same wretched weapons clashed together in a civil war.⁹⁷

Corippus' ventriloquizing of this lament through the voice of a Roman soldier adds significantly to its impact, and in many ways Liberatus' tears for his own complicity in Africa's downfall are the emotional climax of his digression. As a spokesman for both North Africa and the imperial army, Liberatus' confession of his own surrender at Hadrumetum and his own wretched involvement in the civil struggle that followed is important. This is far from a chauvinistic celebration of imperial courage in the face of barbarian attacks. Instead, it surely places moral responsibility for the troubles facing the region with the Africans themselves.⁹⁸

The underlying themes of Liberatus' digression are therefore corruption, suffering, incompetence, and civil war, and this remains important. To reiterate, this was an account of the recent past written by an African poet, placed in the mouth of an African character who was himself implicated in these events, and intended, at least in part, for an African audience who had lived through them. If this section was intended to set out the challenges that faced John at the assumption of his campaign, these would also need to have been credible to the audience of the poem. Yet the greatest lament here is not for the destruction wrought by Antalas, or by the Moors more generally, whose defeat will occupy the remainder of the poem. Instead, it is for the succession of crises which had disrupted the lives of North Africa's inhabitants since the later Vandal period. Justinianic ideology insisted that the occupation had brought peace and orthodoxy to Africa, but Liberatus' account hints that this view may not have been widely shared by the locals, or at least that such a happy resolution had to wait for the victories of John Troglita in 548. In his telling, the earlier imperial occupation may have offered brief moments of peace, which, ironically, recalled the happy days of the Vandal past,

96 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.64-69, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 68.

97 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.164-166, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 72.

98 Pace Corippus, *Iohannis III*, ed. Tommasi Moreschini, 242, who argues that using Liberatus as a spokesman implies that Corippus was following a straightforwardly "imperial" line in the treatment of these events.

but these were soon undermined by rebellion and mutiny, plague, and social collapse, in which all Africans were implicated. Meanwhile, Corippus says nothing about contemporary religious life, and this omission may well have been tactful, as has long been recognized; the Three Chapters controversy was approaching its height at the time when his poem was written and performed, and the poet may have thought it best to steer clear of such contentious issues.⁹⁹ But even without any acknowledgement of the religious tensions that had come with the conquest, his image of imperial rule is far from celebratory. When Corippus and his contemporaries looked back over the history of the previous fifteen years, it seems reasonable to suppose that they remembered civil war, suffering, plague and upheaval quite as vividly as Moorish attacks or Byzantine plenty.

Reflections: Corippus as Historian

Corippus' *Iohannis* is almost always presented as a work of imperialistic propaganda, in which the Byzantine military presence was idealized, and the loyalty of the African provincials was asserted. In this understanding, the poet is either presented as a thoughtless regurgitator of imperial talking points, or as a canny operative in his own right, who sought to cloak simmering religious tensions in the bold garb of Virgilian piety and heroism. But while there can be little doubt that the *Iohannis* was intended in some ways as a political statement, and that Corippus was an emphatic but not uncritical supporter of the Byzantine presence in Carthage, the importance of the poem – and indeed its purpose – can only be appreciated when the difficulties of the earliest imperial occupation are understood. The long analepsis in books III-IV directly articulates some of the anxieties that had beset imperial North Africa in the difficult early years of the occupation, and which the victories of John Troglita had supposedly resolved. If Corippus' poem was intended to encourage his contemporaries to believe that these recent military successes marked a new chapter in the imperial occupation – and there is every reason to assume that it was – the poet and his audience must still have recalled the troubles of the recent past with anguish. John's command was to stand as the resumption – assertion, even – of coherent imperial power, putting to an end civil strife, mutiny, and military incompetence, which had so stained the previous two decades, but it could not erase these memories entirely.

Corippus' deployment of Liberatus as a mouthpiece for this difficult history is important and reflects both the ambivalence of Africans towards the recent past, and the poet's own care in reconciling this with his wider message. Long analeptic digressions had obvious literary precedent, of course, and both linguistic and thematic echoes bind Liberatus' digression into the wider narrative of the poem, but the social implications of the use of this device in an epic concerned with the very recent past are worthy of comment. On the one hand, Corippus' use of an African subaltern as a spokesman for suffering within the region allowed him to include this difficult material within his poem, without disrupting the almost panegyric tone employed in the remainder of the narrative. On the other, the identity of this narrator and particularly his turn to the first person at especially troubling moments, connects the narrative laid out here with the lived experience of the audience of the *Iohannis* as a whole. Ostensibly addressed to John Troglita, the digression of books III and IV acknowledges the grim reality of war, plague, and betrayal for Africans who surely remembered them all too well.

99 Cameron, *Byzantine Africa*, 21-22.

This need not imply that Liberatus' digression should be read as a reflection of Corippus' "true" feelings about the imperial occupation, simply that the adoption of a different narrative voice enabled the poet to navigate potentially treacherous political terrain. The complexity of this point is illustrated by the recapitulation of some of the key episodes in Liberatus' account – most notably the bloody aftermath of Guntharith's coup – in two further analepses placed in the mouths of Antalas and John Troglita.¹⁰⁰ There are some important discrepancies between these perspectives: Antalas emphasizes his own role in the overthrow of the usurper, for example, while John credits Artabanus with the deed. The general also glosses Liberatus' account in concluding that the majority of the recent troubles across Africa had been caused by the betrayal of the basic Roman principles of fidelity and loyalty to the empire – shortcomings which his own command could reverse.¹⁰¹ Corippus' polyvocal rendering of these confusing events can do little to clarify the exact circumstances of Guntharith's rise and subsequent overthrow, let alone the poet's own view of the role played by the main protagonists in the drama, but does hint at the continued resonance of this tragic episode – and its ongoing political sensitivity – even half a decade later.

John's victory drew a line under all this Byzantine in-fighting; in some senses, Corippus' poem helped with this process. The *Iohannis* is emphatically not an uncritical celebration of imperial power in Africa, as is often asserted, but rather it reflects different responses to the imperial presence in its different narrative modes. As such, it can be read as an example of historical negotiation, and the healing of trauma, accomplished through the complementary narrative voices adopted within the text. The *Iohannis*, and particularly the digression of books III-IV, clearly responds to the attitudes of the immediate audience of the poem (and its author) towards the ongoing imperial occupation of North Africa. We have here a view of the imperial occupation written by an inhabitant of the region and addressed to others like him that was responding to the very real anxieties of his time. Here, Corippus hints at a view of the recent past that was far from idealized: one in which plague, social upheaval and civil strife exacerbated the problems caused by the Moorish wars, and in which the North Africans themselves were often directly implicated. His account does not evoke a collective memory in which the Vandal period was denigrated or dismissed, nor yet a celebration of an imperial protection that was challenged only by the incursions of external barbarians, but rather a messy, confused, and ambivalent past. If the *Iohannis* was intended as a celebration of a new imperial dawn promised by the victories of John Troglita and his troops, the poem reflects an awareness of the darkness of the night that had preceded it.

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100 Corippus, *Iohannis*, IV.358-392, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 80-82; IV.407-456, ed. Diggle and Goodyear, 82-84. The relationship between these analepses is explored in detail in Merrills, *Epic, War, and Rebellion*.

101 Merrills, *Epic, War and Rebellion* chapter 1 discusses the political valence of the Virgilian *parcere subiectis* motif within the *Iohannis*.

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Abbreviations

LCL = Loeb Classical Library

CSEL = Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum

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