

THE USE OF *POENUS* AND *CARTHAGINIENSIS*
IN EARLY LATIN LITERATURE

We are all familiar with the negative stereotypes with which Roman authors vilify their Punic enemies. Although a number of useful studies have collected and categorized these stereotypes,¹ these studies have not examined the difference in meaning and connotation between the terms *Poenus* and *Carthaginiensis*. Recent events should warn us of the danger of conflating ethnic and political designations such as Arab with Iraqi or Serb with Yugoslav. Translators and scholars tend to use "Punic" and "Carthaginian" as interchangeable synonyms: we read of, for example, "the Punic constitution" when what is meant is the Carthaginian constitution.² Sometimes the two terms can be used interchangeably, just as the Romans did; however, there are many passages in which attention to the precise meanings and broader connotations is necessary to our understanding. This paper will examine the occurrences of *Poenus* and *Carthaginiensis* in early Latin literature and demonstrate that *Poenus* is an ethnic tag replete with negative connotations, while *Carthaginiensis* is a civic term with neutral or even positive connotations. The differences apparent in early Latin continue throughout the history of Latin literature. We must keep the two terms distinct because the adoption of *Poenus* or *Carthaginiensis* as the term of discourse was meaningful to the Roman audience, which was well attuned to such distinctions. Our attention to the semantic range of these terms in any Latin author will enable us to separate constructed negative stereotypes from more positive portrayals. Authors who use *Poenus* to denounce the vices of the Carthaginians do more than simply vilify the enemy; they implicitly seek to define the *Romanus* by opposition to a constructed *Poenus*.

We begin with precise definitions. *Carthaginiensis* means an inhabitant of Carthage (*Carthago*), a name that is derived from the Phoenician word for "New City."³ *Carthaginiensis* is therefore a civic designation for a member of the Carthaginian polity. Although Carthage was the dominant city, there were other important and independent Punic cities, such as Utica; thus, not all Punics were Carthaginians any more than all Greeks were Athenians, or Spartans, or Syracusans.

The Romans used *Poenus*, which derives from the Greek Φοῖνιξ,⁴ to denote a member of the western Phoenician ethnic group. Φοίνικες meant the Phoenicians, and this included both those who dwelt in Phoenicia proper and those who dwelt in the western colonies, for the Greeks saw no distinction between Phoenicians and

1. See E. Burck, "Das Bild der Karthager in der römischen Literatur," in *Rom und Karthago: ein Gemeinschaftswerk*, ed. Joseph Vogt (Leipzig, 1943), pp. 297–345; M. Dubuisson, "L'image du Carthaginois dans la littérature latine," *Studia Phoenicia* 2 (1983): 159–67; S. Gsell, *Histoire ancienne de l'Afrique du Nord*, vol. 4: *La civilisation carthaginoise* (Paris, 1920), pp. 215–20; L. Prandi, "La fides punica e il pregiudizio anticartaginese," *CISA* 6 (1979): 90–97.

2. This particular example is from S. Moscati, *Il Mondo dei Fenici* (Milan, 1966), p. 147. A listing of such careless interchanges would be pedantic; one need only pick up a volume in the Loeb or Penguin series to see how frequently translators have conflated the two terms.

3. *Qart-Hadasht*. Apparently Cato knew this (*ORF* 194), as did Livy (*Serv. ad Aen.* 1.366). Note also that Polybius always calls the Carthage in Spain Καίνῃ πόλιν ("New City"), while the Romans use the redundant *Carthago Nova*.

4. See A. Ernout and A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris, 1960), p. 518. The word Φοῖνιξ is of uncertain origin, but most probably refers to the red-purple dye of the murex snail that was the chief export of the Phoenician region from an early period.

Punics. It is the Romans who felt the need to distinguish between their rivals in the West, led by Carthage, and the older urban centers in the Levant. For the latter group the Romans adopted the term *Phoinix*, a transliteration of Φοῖνιξ.⁵ The adjective *Punicus* (*Poenicus*) means Punic and can be applied to individuals, their traits, and objects of Punic origin.

The usage of Roman authors confirms that while *Carthaginiensis* is a civic tag and essentially neutral in tone, *Poenus* is not merely an ethnic tag, but also the term of choice for negative discourse. A rigid consistency is not always maintained for stylistic, phonetic, or metrical reasons, but the general pattern is clear that *Poenus* is the defamatory and pejorative term.⁶ We can perhaps see this most clearly in Livy, an author who provides for us a lengthy text in which Punics figure prominently. We see that Livy uses “Punic” to inveigh against *Punica fraus* (22.48.1 and 30.22.6), *Punicus astus* (35.14.12), *Punica ars* (25.39.1), *Punicum ingenium* (24.62.2), and *Punicae versutiae* (42.47.7), as well as Hannibal’s *perfidia plus quam Punica* (21.4.9), and *Punica religio* (22.6.12). There is no comparable pejorative usage of *Carthaginiensis* in Livy. The Latin proverb is *fides Punica*, not *fides Carthaginiensis*.⁷ Livy exalts the *Romanus* by denigrating the *Poenus*, not the *Carthaginiensis*.

But this paper will not discuss the usage of these words in Livy. The authors whose works will be examined here were alive before the fall of Carthage. For them, Carthage was still a living Punic city rather than an historical entity. While their works certainly reveal contemporary prejudices, their comments are free from the stereotypes and slanders later constructed as a justification for the annihilation of Carthage.

The fragments of our earliest literary source, Naevius, tell us very little. The only line directly relevant to this philological discussion is *censet eo venturum obviam Poenum* (ROL 40). The context is uncertain and one wonders who the *Poenus* is. It could be a collective singular, much as Latin uses *miles* to refer to an entire army, or it could refer to a notorious Punic individual, with or without his army, not unlike the Greek usage of “the Mede” to represent the Persian king and his host. Certainly in Livy, the singular noun *Poenus* can mean either the entire Punic army or Hannibal himself; often it is unclear whether Livy even intended any distinction.⁸ One could argue that the use of the ethnic *Poenus*, particularly as a collective singular, is derogatory, but the isolation of this line does not permit any definite conclusions.⁹

5. Plautus seems to have been familiar with the word *Phoinix*, for the *meretrix* in *Pseudolus* is named Phoenicium; however, our earliest testimony to a distinction between *Phoenices* and *Poeni* may be in Varro (Pliny *HN* 3.1.3); cf. Cic. *Scaur.* 42.

6. For example, Plautus uses *Poeni* in *ut vobis victi Poeni poenas sufferant* (*Cist.* 202) for obvious phonetic reasons. The use of the adjective *Punicus* as a neutral modifier for lamps, porridge, threshers, floors, garlic, and pomegranates is not relevant to this study, for in those cases *Punicus* refers to the origin of objects, not a person’s ethnicity or character.

7. See A. Otto, *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig, 1890), p. 291.

8. Consider the usage of *Poenus* (singular) in Livy 22, a fairly representative book. The word is adjectival at 21.1 and 39.18; it means Hannibal himself at 4.5, 12.3, 56.3, and 59.14; it denotes the Punic army at 24.11; the entire Punic side is meant at 14.5, 23.7, and 33.4. Hannibal so dominates the Roman perception of the enemy that it is unclear whether *Poenus* means Hannibal, the Punic host, or Hannibal as the embodiment of the Punic host at 3.7, 15.11, 16.2, 16.4, 18.7, 29.6, and 44.1.

9. For *Poenus* as a collective singular, see M. Barchiesi, *Nevio Epico* (Padua, 1962), pp. 340 and 535.

It is the *Poenulus* of Plautus that provides the first clear evidence of a distinction in connotation between the ethnic and civic designations. The very title of the play—*Poenulus*—prejudices the minds of the audience.¹⁰ The only other occurrence of this word in Latin is pejorative,¹¹ and we should compare the parallel formation *Graeculus*. The diminutive, which Plautus frequently used in titles of his plays, could connote many things, and the audience would have no foreknowledge whether the title character was short, wretched, lovable, or whatever else a diminutive could connote.¹² However, given the features of the genre, the reputation of Plautus, and the bad connotations of the root *Poenus*, they must have expected another *Pseudolus* or *Epidicus*. They would not have been disappointed, for throughout the play Plautus mocks the stereotyped Punic attributes of the title character: his clothing, his stature, his language, his odor, his effeminacy, his licentiousness, and, most of all, his deceitfulness.¹³

Plautus jokes with the negative stereotype of Punic deceit in our very first introduction to the Punic (*Poen.* 111–13):

ita docte atque astu filias quaerit suas
et is omnis linguas scit; sed dissimulat sciens
se scire: Poenus plane est. quid verbis opust?

This may be the earliest surviving allusion to a Punic stereotype in Latin literature, but the offhand way in which the speaker of the prologue refers to the Punic character indicates that Punic deceit is already axiomatic. In these lines the title-character Hanno is quickly and effectively labeled as crafty and cunning (*docte atque astu*) and deceitful (*dissimulat*). Further elaboration is unnecessary (*quid verbis opust?*) because such traits are synonymous with Punic ethnicity: *Poenus plane est*. When the slave Milphio wrongly assumes that Hanno is some sort of shyster (1125–26), he sneers: “praestrigiator hic quidem Poenus probust, / perduxit omnis ad suam sententiam.” In fact, *Poenus* is synonymous with *callidus* to such an extent that it can even become a comparative adjective, for Milphio boasts of his own cleverness by claiming: *nullus me est hodie Poenus Poenior* (“no Punic alive is more Punicky!” 991). In these examples Plautus uses *Poenus* as more than an ethnic designation, he employs it as an insult, and it is noteworthy that nowhere does anyone mock Hanno for being Carthaginian.

Throughout the play *Poenus* is a derogatory label imposed by the non-Carthaginian characters. In contrast, *Carthaginiensis* appears in the play as a civic designation not merely without derogatory overtones, but even with prideful overtones.¹⁴ For example, when Hanno arrives in Act 5, *Carthaginiensis* occurs three times, each time with neutral or good connotations: in lines 962–63 Agorastocles asks Milphio if the women were freeborn Carthaginians; in lines 996–97 Hanno

10. That *Poenulus* was the original title of the play, see A. S. Gratwick, *The “Poenulus” of Plautus and its Attic Original* (Diss., Oxford University, 1969), pp. 538–46.

11. Cic. *Fin.* 4.20.56 *tuus ille Poenulus*, a mocking reference to Zeno, who came from Citium (Cyprus).

12. On the force of diminutives in titles of plays, see J. S. Hanssen, *Latin Diminutives: A Semantic Study* (Bergen, 1952), pp. 81–102.

13. Clothing: 975–77, 1008, 1121, 1298, 1303; stature: 1309–10; language: 990–1028; odor: 1313–14; effeminacy: 1311 (cf. 1317–18); licentiousness: 106–8, 1303; deceitfulness: 111–13, 1032–34, 1106–10, 1124–26.

14. At 59, 84, and 1377 *Carthaginiensis* is a purely neutral civic designation.

declares himself to be Hanno from Carthage, son of Muthumbalis the Carthaginian; and at line 1124 the nurse Giddenis addresses Hanno as *Hanno Carthaginiensis*. Plautus employs *Carthaginiensis* as a positive civic identification, and notably the term of self-identification, the term of choice for Agorastocles, Hanno, and Giddenis, all of whom are Carthaginians. Nowhere do the Carthaginians identify themselves as Punics.

The stereotype of Punic deceit helps to explain the joke in the prologue of Plautus' *Casina*. The speaker asserts that slave marriages do take place in Greece, Carthage, and Apulia: "at ego aio id fieri in Graecia, et Carthagini, / et hic in nostra terra, in Apulia" (71–72). If the audience refuses to believe him, the speaker wagers some wine, so long as the judge be a Punic, Greek, or Apulian (*Cas.* 75–77):

id ni fit, mecum pignus, si quis volt, dato
in urnam mulsi, Poenus dum iudex siet
vel Graecus adeo, vel mea caussa Apulus.

The joke rests upon the proverbial mendacity of these three ethnic groups; hence Plautus made the switch from the simple location (*Carthagini*) to the pejorative ethnic (*Poenus*).¹⁵

These passages from Plautus indicate the different use of *Poenus* and *Carthaginiensis* in the genre of popular drama; the *Annales* of Ennius indicate that the same difference was exploited in early epic poetry.

Carthaginiensis is admissible in hexameters, thus giving Ennius a choice of terms. Given that choice, Ennius uses the civic term in appropriate political contexts. In the line *Appius indixit Carthaginiensis bellum* (frag. 216, Skutsch), Appius declares war upon the state of Carthage, not the Punic people, hence the political term. In the lines "hostem qui feriet ferit (inquit) mi† Carthaginiensis / quisquis erit" ("He who shall smite an enemy will be a Carthaginian, whoever he be," frag. 234), Hannibal—the presumed speaker—offers Carthaginian citizenship, not Punic ethnicity, to those who fight valiantly. Even if this is not a literal offer of citizenship to mercenaries, the speaker declares that anyone who fights bravely will be acting like a true Carthaginian in his eyes (*mi*), whatever his actual ethnic or political identity. Here Carthaginian identity is a positive value, a reward, as it should be in the mouth of a Carthaginian.

Other citations from the *Annales* are ethnographic in nature, hence the use of *Poenus*. These ethnographic remarks, written from a Roman's perspective, are almost invariably negative.¹⁶ Punics customarily sacrifice their own children (*Poeni soliti suos sacrificare puellios*, frag. 214). Punics pay mercenaries rather than fight themselves (*Poeni stipendia pendunt*, frag. 215).¹⁷ Punics are descended from Dido (*Poenos Didone oriundos*, frag. 297). To a Roman, the regular sacrifice of children is barbaric and impious. To a Roman, the use of mercenaries rather than citizen soldiers is unmanly, as is descent from a female founder. Ennius also uses *Poenus* in a

15. See further J. H. Michel, "Le prologue de la *Casina* et les mariages d'esclaves," in *Hommages à Léon Herrmann*, Collection Latomus, vol. 44 (Brussels, 1960), pp. 553–61.

16. The one exception is 472: *Poenos Sarra oriundos* ("Punics sprung from Tyre"). Sarra is the name for Tyre in Phoenician inscriptions and coins.

17. Ennius could have used *Carthaginienses* here, for he probably speaks of the practice of the Carthaginian state rather than the general practice of all Punic cities; however, he probably was attracted by the alliterative jingle.

non-ethnographic passage, and does so solely for the negative connotations of the word. Punics, infamous for their cruelty and arrogance, hack the hamstrings of fallen enemies: *his pernas succidit iniqua superbia Poeni* (frag. 287). The emphatic position of *Poeni* should be noted. Thus, while the citations with *Carthaginiensis* in Ennius are neutral or positive, those with *Poenus* are quite negative and reflect the prevalent stereotypes of Punic cruelty, arrogance, and effeminacy. Ennius, who claims that *moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque*, chooses to vilify the Punic character rather than the Carthaginian polity.

What then of Cato, a figure famed for his anti-Carthaginian sentiments? The pertinent fragments of Cato indicate a distinction between ethnic and civic designations, but they also show how the two could become conflated.¹⁸ When Cato speaks of violations of treaties between Rome and the state of Carthage, he uses *Carthaginienses*: “deinde duovicesimo anno post dimissum bellum, quod quattuor et viginti annos fuit, Carthaginienses sextum de foedere decessere” (*HR Rel.* 84). When making his speech in favor of declaring war on Carthage he accordingly dwells upon the outrages committed by that state and its citizens (*ORF* 195b):

qui sunt, qui foedera saepe ruperunt? Carthaginienses. qui sunt, qui crudelissime bellum gesserunt? Carthaginienses. qui sunt, qui Italiam deformaverunt? Carthaginienses. qui sunt, qui sibi postulent ignosci? Carthaginienses. videte ergo quam conveniat eos impetrare.

The Carthaginians seek peace even as they actively prepare for war: “*Carthaginiensis nobis iam hostes sunt; nam qui omnia parat contra me, ut quo tempore velit, bellum possit inferre, hic iam mihi hostis est, tametsi nondum armis agat*” (*ORF* 195). Cato urges the declaration of war upon a political entity, Carthage, not an *ethnos*, the *Poeni*, hence the use of the civic term. *Carthago delenda est*, not *Poeni delendi sunt*.

In our verbatim fragments, Cato’s use of *Poenus* is infrequent and less marked. His identification of L. Quinctius Flaminius’ *scortum* as Punic (“inter cetera obiecit Philippum Poenum, carum ac nobile scortum,” *ORF* 69) is defamatory and irrelevant to the story of Flaminius’ murder of a Gaul for the amusement of his companion. This gratuitous detail suggests that one may please a Punic with a senseless show of cruelty, and *scortum* has pathic connotations.¹⁹

Polybius provides an unexpected and very important parallel that confirms a distinction in usage between the neutral civic term and the derogatory ethnic term. Although Polybius wrote in Greek and thus cannot be a direct witness to a distinction between *Poenus* and *Carthaginiensis*, he wrote in a Roman context and his usage of ethnic and civic designations is highly relevant. The first point to note is that Polybius almost always refers to the Carthaginians as the *Καρχηδόνιοι*; only eight exceptions survive where he calls them *Φοίνικες*.²⁰ These eight exceptions are striking given the over 600 occurrences of *Καρχηδόνιοι* and its forms; *Καρχηδόνιοι*

18. If Gellius has faithfully reproduced a long passage from the *Origines* (*HR Rel.* 83, *apud N.A.* 3.7), Cato freely alternates between *imperator Poenus* and *imperator Carthaginiensis*. There can be similar variation in a non-literary document: see the elogium of G. Duilius (*CIL* 1² 25 = *ILS* 65), an imperial copy of a third-century B.C. inscription recording his achievements, which include victories over *claseis Poenicas* and *copias Cartaciniensis*, as well as his enslavement of *Cartacinie[nsis inge]nuos*. There is little of note in Cato’s use of *Carthaginiensis* in *HRR* 67 and 86.

19. Cf. Cic. *Phil.* 2.44, Petron. 9.6.

20. This does not include 1.80.6, a reference to the Punic language (Φοινικιστί).

is clearly the unmarked term and we must ask why Polybius, consciously or not, used Φοίνικες when he did. Closer examination of these eight passages reveals ethnic stereotyping on the part of Polybius; one might even call them ethnic slurs. We shall consider the three most blatantly derogatory citations in which the Punics are branded as crafty, greedy, and physically inferior.

Polybius begins his anecdote about how Hannibal employed disguises to move about his camp with an allusion to stereotyped, or rather, proverbial Punic craft: [Hannibal] ἐχρήσατο δὲ τινι καὶ Φοινικικῷ στρατηγήματι τοιοῦτῳ κατὰ τὴν παραχειμασίαν ("during the winter he employed a thoroughly Punic deception," 3.78.1).²¹ The defamatory phrase τοιοῦτῳ Φοινικικῷ is jarring given Polybius' generally even-handed treatment of the Carthaginians. His use of the ethnic as a pejorative modifier is akin to Milphio's use of *Poenior* as a pejorative at *Poenulus* 991. Clearly Polybius takes for granted that his readers, both Greek and Roman, understood the tradition of Punic deception, and the modifier τοιοῦτῳ Φοινικικῷ is thus replete with negative connotations.

Second, Polybius refers in an offhand way to Punic greed as a natural trait when he pauses to consider the situation of Spain in 211 B.C. The Carthaginian commanders had mastered the Romans but were unable to master themselves. Instead of pressing onward after their victory, they squabbled among themselves, a habit that Polybius claims stems from the love of plunder and lust for power innate in Punics: πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἐστασίαζον, ἀεὶ παρατριβόμενοι διὰ τὴν ἔμφυτον Φοῖνιζι πλεονεξίαν καὶ φιλαρχίαν (9.11.2). The context is one of recrimination, the term of reference Φοῖνιζι.

Third, in his comparison of the Roman and Carthaginian states in Book 6, Polybius makes a few ethnographic remarks, particularly in section 52. Polybius concedes that the Carthaginian state is superior in naval matters, but that the Roman system, which relies upon citizen-soldiers, produces better infantry. In fact, Polybius claims not only that the Roman system is superior to the Carthaginian system, but that the Italian peoples surpass the Punic and African peoples in strength and courage by their very nature: διαφέρουσι μὲν οὖν καὶ φύσει πάντες Ἰταλιῶται Φοινίκων καὶ Λιβύων τῇ τε σωματικῇ ῥώμῃ καὶ ταῖς ψυχικαῖς τόλμαις (6.52.10).²²

Our frequent conflation of *Poenus* and *Carthaginiensis* is as sloppy and misleading as our tendency to conflate Greek and Athenian. At the pedantic level, we must resist the temptation to use ethnic and civic terms interchangeably. But more importantly, we must realize that *Poenus* is not just an ethnic identification; it is the term of choice for negative stereotyping, the term of choice for anti-Punic discourse.²³

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21. Note that Polybius gives another ethnic stereotype, Celtic perfidy (τὴν ἀθεσίαν τῶν Κελτῶν), as the motivation for Hannibal's stratagem.

22. The other references to Punics in Polybius do not contradict the negative connotations of Φοῖνιζι. In two places that report the words and thoughts of Scipio Africanus, Polybius juxtaposes the ethnic and civic designations. At 14.1.3, Scipio thinks that the fickle Syphax had had enough of Phoenician friendship; at 15.4.2, Scipio points out to Masinissa how the Phoenicians violate treaties. There is no discernible negative connotation at 1.19.10, 11.19.4, and 14.5.4.

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