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CHAPTER 1

'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 flammas | 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 augescit crescentem frondibus ignem | arbor et in cineres sese consumpta resoluit. | uertuntur miserae caesis cum ciuibus urbes | cunctaque direptis conflagrant 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.

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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, … conlucent flammis*. Vinchesi (1983), 131–2, also notes the linguistic echo here of *Aen* XII.672 (which may have been less obvious to his audience).

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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 panegyrical 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] *Ioh* Proem and I.1–7. 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.

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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. *BV* II.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.

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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).

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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 *Eclogues* 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.

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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 Corippan 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).

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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).

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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); Didderen (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.

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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 uates 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*[.]

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