

# Viriathus



**Viriathus - Portuguese national hero.**

## **Part I**

Of all defiant characters who took up arms against Rome during her rise to dominate the ancient world, few have left such an admirable and virtuous impression on the history books as the Lusitanian guerrilla leader named Viriathus. Viriathus was born in Lobriga, call Lorica by the Romans, in the Hermínios mountains, the modern Serra da Estrela, in Portugal.

“It seemed as if, in that thoroughly prosaic age, one of the Homeric heroes had reappeared”

What is primarily know of Viriathus and the conflict he lead his fellow Lusitanians in is through Appian’s treatment of the Iberians Wars and a few scattered fragments left of Cassius Dio’s treatment of the same subject. Though Polybius no doubt covered the topic in his history, the

extant version is heavily fragmented for this period. Therefore, all that seems to be left is Polybius' famous application of the term *Purinos Polemos* or "Fiery War", also used much later by Appian, to describe the series of Iberian conflicts that Viriathus' exploits were so important a part.

Through Dio we learn that Viriathus was from humble origins; a shepherd who like most Lusitanian men turned to the life of a brigand; which is what Strabo indeed tersely calls him when making a passing, disparaging remark about the Iberian people's innate inability to ever form a true confederacy. Dio's fragment goes on to paint a glowing portrait of Viriathus' virtuously austere character which is also the tone used by Appian in his account.

It is commonly supposed that Viriathus may not have been the name by which he was known to his fellow countrymen but more of a descriptive name bestowed on him by the Romans or other contemporaries. Using a passage from Pliny as a clue (33.12), it would seem the name Viriathus described him as wearing bracelets in the Celtic manner:

"Yet men even, at the present day, wear gold upon the arms in form of bracelets--known as "dardania," because the practice first originated in Dardania, and called "viriolæ" in the language of the Celts, "viriaë" in that of Celtiberia."

Nonetheless, it would appear that Viriathus may have participated in the Lusitanian raids that precipitated Praetor Servius Sulpicius Galba & Proconsul Lucius Licinius Lucullus' excursions into his country in 151 BC & 150 BC. Alarmed at the combined movements of the Romans, the Lusitanians sent offers of submission which Galba used as a pretext for enticing these men out of their mountain stronghold with promises of peace and land to settle. Once down in the plains to negotiate, Galba split them up in three groups, had them each surrounded in turn and apparently slaughtered upwards 7000 men.

Appian places Viriathus among the survivors of Galba's treachery but whether this was an actuality or a literary embellishment is not of much consequence. Three years later, Viriathus was among a war band of Lusitanians who, while ravaging Turdania were attacked and then trampled by Roman Proprætor Caius Vetilius. Seeing no recourse but submission, Viriathus' companions sent the symbolic olive branch to Vetilius requesting peace in exchange for land to settle as subjects of Rome

According to the classical account, it seems that Vetilius accepted their submission and was prepared to resettle the members of the war band when Viriathus stepped forward and reminded his companions of Rome's previous treachery. Though almost completely hemmed in, Viriathus promised his companions that if they followed his orders, he would lead them all to safety so they could face the Romans again on more favorable terms.

## **Part II**

Thus inspired by his conviction, they agreed to follow him and chose him to be their leader. Viriathus had the men line up for battle as if they were intent on fighting the Romans.

With a masterful display of battlefield wit, he chose 1000 of his best men to stay by him and

commanded the rest to scatter in different directions and then make their way by varying routes to the city of Tribola the moment he mounted his horse.

Vetilius chose not to pursue the fleeing Lusitanians and instead accepted Viriathus' offer of battle. Over the course of two days, Viriathus and his cavalry harassed the Romans with a strategy that Appian so appropriately called "dashing around on the (same) field"; which must have been a constant ebb and flow of attack then withdrawal in a purposefully confused manor.

During the second night and once Viriathus had supposed that the others were safe on the way to Tribola, he and his cavalry absconded during the night and made their way swiftly for the meeting point. The Romans pursued but according to Appian were not able to follow at an equal pace "by reason of the weight of their armor, their ignorance of the roads, and the inferiority of their horses."

Once reunited with his forces, Viriathus set an ambush for the Romans en route to Tribola. As the Romans passed through, Viriathus' forces attacked them from all possible sides, killing quite a few by driving them over a cliff and taking many others prisoner. According to Appian, Vetilius himself was one of the prisoners but the man who took him prisoner "not knowing who he was, but seeing that he was old and fat, and considering him worthless, killed him."

Scarcely more than half of the Roman forces survived the ambush and those that did, retreated all the way to Mediterranean coast near the Straights of Gibraltar and behind the walls of Carteia. The Quaestor who had accompanied Vetilius fortified Carteia with the survivors and sent for aid to Rome's Celtiberian allies where he received 5000 reinforcements from the Belli and Titthi tribes. He subsequently sent them out to face Viriathus and they were defeated to such an extent that none returned to report on the outcome. With the Quaestor and his forces not risking to venture outside of Carteia, Viriathus and his forces ravaged the allies of Rome in the countryside of Carpetania for the rest of the year.

### **Part III**

The following year in 146 BC, the Romans sent Praetor Caius Plautius to Spain with 10000 fresh infantry troops and 1300 cavalry.

Upon his arrival, Viriathus quit Carpetania and withdrew into Lusitania whereby Plautius sent an advanced force of about 4000 to pursue him. Utilizing his signature 'feigned flight' tactic, Viriathus turned on his pursuers and routed the Romans, killing most in the process.

Plautius and the rest of his forces made haste and crossed the Tagus to avenge the slaughter and met Viriathus on an olive-tree covered mountain top known as the Hill of Venus; where he was encamped.

There, Viriathus defeated Plautius' army so roundly that the Roman general and the remainder of his forces withdrew into winter quarters even though it was still midsummer. For the rest of the year, Viriathus' forces overran the country without check and levied new resources by threatening the destruction of crops in Roman administered territories.

Once news of the latest developments reached Rome, the Senate deemed the situation threatening enough to send a consul and consular army into Spain. Correspondingly, the next year Quintus Fabius Maximus Aemilianus, the adopted son of Lucius Aemilius Paulus, conqueror of Macedon was given Spain as his province. In an effort to spare the worn out veterans of the Punic, Greek and Macedonian wars, Aemilianus levied two legions of mostly new recruits and headed for Spain.

Aemilianus and his army did not arrive until summer of 145 BC which indicates that they perhaps made their way by sea, instead of overland through Gaul and thus had to wait for the sailing season to commence. He mustered his and some allied forces in the town of Urso in Hispania Baetica, near Astapa. Not wanting to face Viriathus until his inexperienced army had been sufficiently drilled, he left the army in the care of his legate and went to Gades to offer a sacrifice to Hercules at the famous Temple of Melqart.

During Aemilianus' absence Viriathus attacked the Roman foragers, killing many and terrifying the others. Using poor judgment, the legate came out to fight Viriathus and was defeated swiftly while Viriathus was able to capture standards and booty. When Aemilianus returned, Viriathus consistently attempted to draw the Romans out onto the battlefield but Aemilianus was never tempted. He continued to exercise his troops, only sending them out on minor skirmishes in an effort to strengthen their resolve, test the enemy's strength and give them much needed experience. It was also from this point on that the foragers went out only with an armed cordon of troops as Aemilianus had seen his father do in Macedon.

The next year at the end of winter quarters, Aemilianus was continued in his post by the Senate and he deemed the army sufficiently ready to fight. Over the course of 144 BC the Romans succeeded in putting Viriathus' forces to flight but only after numerous valiant struggles. Regardless, Viriathus was on the run and the Romans succeeded in capturing two of Viriathus' chief towns after which Aemilianus and his army went into winter quarters in Corduba.

Regardless of the successes of Aemilianus, Viriathus' campaign against the Romans had inspired many Celtiberian tribes to follow his example. In 143 BC, Celtiberia broke out in an open insurrection that would later be known as the Numantine War which more than neutralized the Roman's current good fortune against Viriathus.

## **Part IV**

The successful Quintus Fabius Maximus Aemilianus was then succeeded in command of Hispania Baetica by a different general, Quintus Pompeius. The first encounter between Quintus Pompeius and Viriathus ended to the benefit of the Romans. Viriathus retreated south of the Tagus, towards the famed Hill of Venus. However, once again, Viriathus successfully turned upon his pursuers and killed over 1000 Romans and captured many standards. Quintus Pompeius was driven back to his camp and Viriathus then managed to drive out a garrison from Itucca, one of the cities lost to the Romans the previous year. Viriathus went on to ravage the countryside of Bastitania while Quintus Pompeius was paralyzed, as Appian says, by his "timidity and inexperience". Ultimately, Quintus Pompeius went into winter quarters in autumn, leaving Baetica's defense in the hands of a Spaniard from Italica named Caius Marcius.

Quintus Fabius Maximus Servilianus, brother of Quintus Fabius Maximus Aemilianus succeeded the inept Quintus Pompeius the following year bringing a force comparable to his brother's as well as 10 elephants and a number of additional horses obtained from the Numidian king Micipsa. Before Servilianus' forces were all together the first contest between the new Roman force and Viriathus' much smaller band of 6000 ended in a stalemate.

Once Servilianus' forces were complete he established a large base camp and advanced against Viriathus. The Romans were initially successful and Viriathus was compelled to retreat back into Lusitania. Yet again, Viriathus took advantage of a disorderly pursuit and turned on the Romans killing upwards 3000 and driving the rest back to their camp. The Lusitanians went on to attack the Roman camp and even though the Romans eventually put up a gallant defense, were harassed by the light armed troops and tenacious cavalry of the Lusitanians until they were apparently driven out of their camp and back to Itucca.

After this, Viriathus was in desperate need of provisions and retired to Lusitania by burning his camp and departing under the cover of night. The rest of the year the Romans campaigned with great success by choosing not to pursue Viriathus but instead, march against towns in Baetica that had sided with him. After plundering many towns he turned west towards the Cuneus and then north into Lusitania.

While on the march, the Romans were attacked by several large guerilla bands and at first lost considerable amounts of booty they had captured along the way. The Romans eventually vanquished the guerillas and of the men that fell into their hands, some 500 leaders were beheaded, the Roman subjects found amongst them had their hands cut off and the rest were sold into slavery. Regardless of all the Roman successes during this short campaign, the war with Viriathus once again showed how lubricious and unpredictable it could be.

While the Romans were besieging a town in fidelity with Viriathus called Erisana, the later and his forces snuck into the town one night and made a successful sally the next day against the Romans working the circumvallation trenches. The remaining Romans were mustered to order of battle by Servilianus but were defeated and put to flight. The hasty retreat lead them into a precipitous mountain pass among high cliffs where the Romans were surrounded by the Lusitanians. Escape was now impossible and they had no choice but unconditional surrender.

## **Part V**

Viriathus used the victory with great sagacity, considering the situation an opportune moment to bring the war to an end and win the respect and gratitude of the Romans. He agreed to allow the Romans to depart uninjured, on condition of their permitting the Lusitanians to retain undisturbed possession of their own territory, and of their recognizing him as a friend and ally of the Roman people. Servilianus concluded a treaty with Viriathus on these terms, and being glad to conclude this troublesome war, it was ratified by the Senate and people of Rome.

Though brought to an agreeable end, the consul Quintus Servilius Caepio, who succeeded his brother Servilianus in the command of Hispania Baetica, was not content with the peaceful outcome of the war. It can be reckoned that he had looked forward to the war in Spain as an opportunity for gaining both wealth and glory; and he sent a flood of letters to Rome to induce the

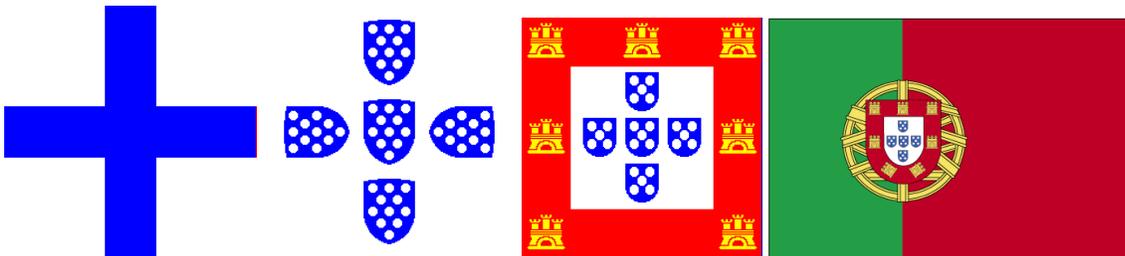
senate to break the treaty by representing it as unworthy of the Roman people.

At first the senate could not be persuaded to give approval for open violation of the peace but acquiesced to the point of contriving that Caepio could harass Viriathus as long as he did it secretly and without open attack. However, either through gaining a suitable pretext or being convinced finally by Caepio's ceaseless flow of correspondence on the issue, Rome faithlessly declared war and Caepio invaded Lusitania.

Confronted at first in Carpetania, Viriathus judged it unwise to confront such a superior force. He dispersed his forces and eluded the Romans for a whole year. Caepio tried in vain to find Viriathus and marched deep into Lusitania as far as the territory of the Vettones and the Callaici.

In a fragment of Cassius Dio we learn that during the course of this campaign, Caepio became highly loathed by his troops because of his harshness and cruelty. The men, most especially the cavalry, apparently made jokes about their commander and spoke openly and negatively about him in the camp. Once Caepio got word of what was going on, he commanded the cavalry, whom he deemed to be the instigators, to go to the mountain where Viriathus was entrenched and cut firewood. Seeing the rash danger inherent in the endeavor, the tribunes and lieutenants begged for Caepio to reconsider but he would not.

The cavalymen, choosing to perish over speaking respectfully to Caepio were joined by the allied cavalry and other volunteers and went on the mission given them. They returned successfully and piled the wood up around the general's quarters with the intent of burning Caepio to death. He would have had he not apparently escaped the blaze in time.



**Flags of Portugal (ancient Lusitania) in 1081,1143,1481 and today.**

## **Part VI**

The following year Caepio was joined with the forces of praetor Sextus Junius Brutus who began operating against guerrilla bands emulating Viriathus. The brutal movements of the Romans in Lusitania which had been escalating since the renewal of hostilities induced Viriathus to sue for peace on any terms. Viriathus sent three very close friends Audax, Ditalco, and Minurus to negotiate with Caepio. The latter bribed the envoys with promises of large rewards to assassinate Viriathus.

Viriathus was always cautious and in order to be ready for any emergency, he slept lightly and in full armor. Ironically through the very nature of this caution, his closest friends were allowed to visit him at any hour. That being so, Audax and the rest of the conspirators took advantage of

precedent and just as Viriathus had fallen asleep, they entered the tent under the devious pretext of urgency. There they killed Viriathus where he laid; stabbing him discretely in one of the only places not covered by armor, his throat.

They accomplished this in a manor so that the wound was concealed from any cursory glance. The murderers then fled to Caepio before anyone in the camp had realized what had been done. They petitioned the Roman commander for their due compensation but were awarded only their safety to live. Caepio gave the retort that he did not approve of the murder of a general by his own soldiers and for the collection of payment or any other demands, he referred them to Rome.

The following morning when Viriathus' death was discovered, grief and despair swept through the Lusitanian camp and there was an immense feeling of frustration because no one knew who had committed the crime.

Viriathus was buried with the highest honors and great pageantry. In the words of Appian:

"They arrayed the body of Viriathus in splendid garments and burned it on a lofty funeral pile. Many sacrifices were offered for him. Troops of horse and foot in armor marched around him singing his praises in barbarian fashion. Nor did they depart from the funeral pile until the fire had gone out. When the obsequies were ended, they had gladiatorial contests at his tomb.

Initially the death of their leader inspired the Lusitanians enough that a replacement was quickly found in a man named Tantalus and hostilities were quickly renewed. Ultimately however, this successor was no match for a Roman consular army and by the end of the year was obliged to submit to Caepio on the condition that they were given land to settle; a condition that seems to have finally been honored.

Even to this day, Viriathus is considered a mythical portuguese national hero for reasons so aptly enumerated by his primary biographer:

"So great was the longing for Viriathus after his death - a man who had the highest qualities of a commander as reckoned among barbarians, always foremost in facing danger and most exact in dividing the spoils. He never consented to take the lion's share, even when friends begged him to, but whatever he got he divided among the bravest. Thus it came about, a most difficult task and one never before achieved by any other commander so easily that in the eight years of this war, in an army composed of various tribes, there never was any sedition, the soldiers were always obedient and fearless in the presence of danger"

But the most fitting epitaph has to be the remarks found in the precious fragment of Cassius Dio in which he said:

"He was glad enough to get any food that came to hand and whatever drink fell to his lot; most of his life he lived under the open sky and was satisfied with nature's bedding. Consequently he was superior to any heat or cold, and was neither troubled by hunger nor annoyed by any other privation; for he found full satisfaction for all his needs in whatever he had at hand, as if it were the very best. And yet, possessed of such a physique, as the result both of nature and training, he excelled still more in his mental powers. He was swift to plan and accomplish whatever was needful, for he not only knew what must be done, but also understood the proper occasion for it. He was equally clever at feigning ignorance of the most obvious facts and knowledge of the most

hidden secrets.

Furthermore, he was not only general but his own assistant in every undertaking. He was seen to be neither humble nor overbearing; indeed, obscurity of family and reputation for strength were so combined in him that he seemed to be neither inferior nor superior to any one. And, in fine, he carried on the war not for the sake of personal gain or power, nor through anger, but for the sake of warlike deeds in themselves; hence he was accounted at once a lover and a master of war.

**Viriathus** was written by **António Conde**



**Viriathus** was born in Lobriga (Lorica), the modern Loriga, Portugal -  
Coat of arms.

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