

IVORY TUSKS

by

Joseph Busuttil, B.A., Lic.D., Ph.D. (Lond.).

In the first half of the second century or in the closing years of the third century B.C. the fleet of Masinissa, the king of the Numidians, landed in Malta not far from where the temple of Juno stood. The king's admiral carried away some huge tusks (1) from the temple, took them to Africa and presented them to his master. The latter was at first delighted with the gift; but when he found out whence it had been brought, he immediately sent some trusted persons to return the tusks to Malta and to put them back in the temple. An inscription was added saying that the King had accepted them without knowing whence they had come; when he knew, he had them taken and put back in their place. The story of the tusks does not end here: during Verres's term of office in Sicily (73-71 B.C.) they were removed once again on the orders of the praetor.

This episode is related by two different Latin writers: by Cicero in the *Verrine Orations* (11,4, 103-104) and by Valerius Maximus in the *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri novem* (1, 2, Ex. 8).

Cicero told this anecdote in order to make Verres, the Roman Praetor, appear inferior to Masinissa, the African King. Whilst the latter had unwittingly received stolen objects, the former gave express orders that the tusks be stolen; Masinissa had them sent back the moment he knew that they belonged to Juno's temple; Verres had them removed through the priests of Venus (2). Valerius Maximus, writing in the time of Tiberius (14-47 A.D.), views the matter from a different angle. He included the above-mentioned incident in his collection of anecdotes written merely for rhetorical purposes.

Valerius Maximus merely repeats, with some slight exceptions, the facts of the story as described by Cicero (3). A close look at his style shows that he follows the same order of sentences already found in Cicero (4). Some key-words are found in both authors (5); certain words used by

1. For *dentes* with the meaning of *Tusks* cf. Varro, *Ling.* 7, 39: *quos dentes multi dicunt sunt cornua*. They are not merely *dentes* but *dentes eburnei*. cf. *Livy* 37, 59, 3; *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*.
2. Cf. *Verr.* 11, 4, 104: *Haec ista omnia . . . per servos venerios, quos eius rei causa miserat, tollenda atque asportanda curavit*.
3. Cf. Appendix 1 and 2.
4. Cf. a. *Classe, quondam Masinissae regis ad eum locum adpulsam praefectum* (Cicero) *Masinissa cuius cum praefectus classis Melitam appulisset* (Valerius).
 b. *dentes eburneos incredibili magnitudine e fano sustulisse et eos in*

Cicero have been replaced in Valerius by others with similar meaning (6). This leads one to the conclusion that Valerius's source is Cicero. Valerius uses Cicero's works as a source in other parts of his work (7).

Cicero introduces the story by the vague expression *memoriae proditum est* — the story has been handed down. It is known as a fact that he was acquainted with certain Maltese (8). He must surely have discussed Verres's robberies in Malta with the Maltese delegates sent to testify against their former Praetor in Rome in 70 B.C.

Masinissa's fleet landed in Malta either in the last years of the third century or in the first half of the second century B.C. Masinissa was born shortly after 240 B.C., probably in 238 B.C. and died in 148 B.C. (9). Cicero calls him King; and Masinissa was not a king before 202 or 201 B.C. (10). Therefore the Numidian fleet entered Maltese territorial waters in between 202 (201) — 148 B.C. Unfortunately Cicero does not give other details which may help one in delimiting the date still further. On the other hand 201 B.C. marked the end of the Second Punic War and it is doubtful whether Masinissa had a fleet then. It is more likely that the event took place in the second century B.C.

It is not clear why the Numidian fleet entered the Maltese harbour. It could not have been a courtesy visit nor, it seems, an accidental landing. No one would have expected Masinissa's admiral to carry away precious objects found in a temple in a foreign land. If the admiral laid his hands on 'religious' articles the soldiers or sailors must presumably have helped themselves to other things. The presence of Masinissa's fleet with its admiral, the taking away of precious objects and other facts, which, one

Africam portasse Masinissaeque donasse (Cicero); cum dentes eburneos eximiae magnitudinis sublatos ad eum pro dono attulisset (Valerius).

c. Ubi audisset unde essent (Cicero); ubi comperit unde essent advecti (Valerius)

d. Certos homines in quinqueremi mississe qui eos reponerent (Cicero); quinqueremi reportandos Melitam inque templo conlocandos curavit (Valerius)

e. in eis scriptum litteris Punicis fuit (Cicero); insculptos litteris-ejus gentis (Valerius).

f. regem imprudentem accepisse (Cicero)
regem ignorantem eos accepisse (Valerius)

g. Re cognita reportandos reponendosque curasse (Cicero)
libenter deae reddidisse (Valerius)

5. Cf. Underlined words in Note 4.

6. Cf. e.g. *Ignorantem* for *imprudentem*; *pro dono* for *donasse* etc.

7. Cf. Teuffel and Schwabe, *History of Roman Literature*, London 1892, Vol. II sub voce *Valerius Maximus*.

8. Cf. *In Verr.* 11, 4, 38-40; and *Fam.* XIII, 42.

9. Cf. *R.E.*, XIV, 2, p. 2154-2159.

10. Cf. *R.E.* *Ibid.*

suspects, have been suppressed by Cicero, suggest that this landing was part of a full scale military operation (11). The concluding words of Cicero which imply that Masinissa was an enemy of the Maltese (12) strengthen this opinion.

Since the end of the Second Punic War (201 B.C.) Masinissa had been repeatedly encroaching upon Carthaginian possessions in Africa. In 161 the Romans quite unjustly approved Masinissa's seizure of a particularly large and prosperous area and a further example occurred around 158-156 B.C. (13). Did Masinissa have designs also on Malta? Malta had been before 218 B.C. in the hands of the Carthaginians. Whilst the Romans allowed Masinissa to grow strong in Africa they would not allow him, one presumes, to occupy islands and places elsewhere especially if these belonged to other Provinces. Masinissa sent the tusks back in a quinquereme — one of the largest ships in antiquity — and sent specially picked men with them. This was intended, it seems, as an apology for what had happened; at the same time he exonerated himself of all the blame.

An inscription was also added. Cicero does not say who wrote it. He merely produces it in Latin and tries to couch it in the usual religious style full of assonance and alliteration. The first part can be taken as a spondaic hexameter the second as an imperfect dactylic hexameter. On the other hand Valerius, it seems, had no time for such niceties. He merely says that Masinissa sent the tusks back inscribed with the letters of his own people (i.e. Punic), and reproduces Cicero's translation in his own words. It was written in Punic because, Valerius says, it was the language of the Numidians.

11. Cf. O. Brès, *Malta Antica Illustrata*, Roma 1816.

12. Cf. *In Verr.* 11, 4, 104: quod neque praedo violarit antea neque unquam hostis attigerit

13. Cf. A.E. Astin, *Scipio Aemilianus*, Oxford, 1967, p. 49.

APPENDIX

Cicero: *In Verrem* 11, 4, 103-104:

Quin etiam hoc memoriae proditum est, classe quondam Masinissae regis ad eum locum adpulsa praefectum regium dentes eburneos incredibili magnitudine e fano sustulisse et eos in Africam portasse Masinissaeque donasse. Regem primo delectatum esse munere; post, ubi audisset unde essent, statim certos homines in quinqueremi misisse qui eos dentes reponerent. Itaque in iis scriptum litteris Punicis fuit

Regem Masinissam imprudentem accepisse,
re cognita reportandos reponendosque curasse.