



DOI: 10.22363/2312-8127-2023-15-3-292-300

EDN: TZYDJI

Research article / Научная статья

The duel between Marius and the Celtiberian: a new reading

I.V. Merkulov

Novoanninsky city school No 5,
58, Pionerskaya St, Novoanninsky city, Volgograd region, Russian Federation, 403951

Moy-school@yandex.ru

Abstract. The duel of Gaius Marius with a Celtiber is one of the heroic episodes of the early biography of the future seven-time consul and commander. Plutarch's information about this duel is fragmentary and does not allow us to fully clarify the circumstances under which it took place. In part, they are clarified by the archaeological data obtained by A. Schulten during excavations in the area of ancient Numantia. After analyzing the sources and literature, the author came to the conclusion that the episode with the duel became for Marius the starting point in his military career, from which his rise began. According to the author, in fact, the notorious duel could have been an ordinary skirmish, but later Marian propaganda turned it into a heroic deed of Marius, a brilliant military leader and an experienced «father commander». The author does not exclude the possibility that Plutarch himself became the culprit of the confusion, who did not distinguish between an individual duel and participation in a collective hand-to-hand combat.

Keywords: Numantia, tribunus militum, equites, dona militaria, phalera, hasta pura, corona, primipilus

Article history: Received: 01.04.2023. Accepted: 25.04.2023.

For citation: Merkulov IV. The duel between Marius and the Celtiberian: a new reading *RUDN Journal of World History*. 2023;15(3):292–300. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8127-2023-15-3-292-300>

© Merkulov I.V., 2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

Поединок Мария с кельтибером: новое прочтение

И.В. Меркулов ✉

Новоаннинская городская школа № 5,
403951, Российская Федерация, Волгоградская область, Новоаннинский район,
г. Новоаннинский, ул. Пионерская, д. 58

✉ Moy-school@yandex.ru

Аннотация. Поединок Гая Мария с кельтибером — один из героических эпизодов ранней биографии будущего семикратного консула и полководца. Сведения Плутарха об этом поединке отрывочны и не позволяют в полной мере прояснить те обстоятельства, при которых он произошел. Отчасти их проясняют археологические данные, полученные А. Шультемом в ходе раскопок в районе древней Нуманции. Проанализировав источники и литературу, автор пришел к выводу, что эпизод с поединком стал для Мария отправной точкой в его военной карьере, с которой началось его возвышение. По мнению автора, на самом деле пресловутый поединок мог быть заурядной стычкой, однако позднейшая марианская пропаганда превратила его в геройский подвиг Мария — блестящего военачальника и опытного «отца-командира». Автор не исключает, что виновником путаницы стал сам Плутарх, не отличавший индивидуальный поединок от участия в коллективной рукопашной схватке.

Ключевые слова: Нуманция, военный трибун, всадники, военные награды и отличия, фалера, наградное копье с серебряным наконечником, венок, примипил

История статьи: Поступила в редакцию: 01.03.2023. Принята к публикации: 25.04.2023.

Для цитирования: *Merkulov I.V.* Поединок Гая Мария с кельтибером: новое прочтение // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Всеобщая история. 2023. Т. 15. № 3. С. 292–300. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8127-2023-15-3-292-300>

The duel between Marius and the Celtiberian is one of the few accounts of Marius' early biography. Plutarch is the only ancient historian who tells about this event (Plut. Mar. 3). None of the contemporary researchers doubts its trustworthiness [2. P. 144; 6. P. 28; 8. P. 241; 11. P. 66]. But Appian who gives a detailed description of the events around Numantia in 134–133 B.C. does not mention any duel. It should be mentioned that this author is the most precise and reliable source as he must have used the works of Polybius, the friend of Scipio Aemilianus who accompanied him in his military campaign and described his deeds [4. P. 122; 9. P. 782–783; 14. P. 141, 170; 15. Sp. 1458]. But it is not known at what stage of the campaign the duel took place. According to Appian's version, it would be logical to attribute it to the time of the siege of the city, when "the Numantians often came out in battle formation and challenged the Romans for a fight" (App. Iber. 90). Plutarch also attributes the duel to the time of the siege

However, there are a number of circumstances and facts that refute an idea of any combat. Appian writes that "although the Numantines often went out

in battle formation and challenged Scipio for a battle, he paid no attention to them considering that there was no point in fighting people who were fighting under the pressure of despair and that it was much better to lock them up in the city and starve them” (App. Iber. 90). Thus the commander avoided all sorts of provocation by the Celtiberians who wanted to impose a battle. Taking into consideration the strategic situation as well as the forces and means of the sides, it would be logical to suppose that first of all Scipio was interested in the battle, not the Numantians [1. P. 144; 12. P. 259]. It was much more profitable for him to solve the case with one general battle rather than to conduct a long campaign which required a lot of efforts and resources. The correction was made by the Numantians themselves. Realizing that an open clash was inexpedient, they locked themselves in the city in the hope of help from outside and thus lost time. The Romans began the siege. The besiegers had only one option: to concentrate the bulk of their troops to break through a separate section of the Roman defensive line, burst it and break out of the encirclement.

The jousting usually took place either before or in the heat of battle to inflame the spirits of the warriors. In some cases they also had a religious significance (Liv. II.20.7; IV.32.11; VII.11.1; Flor. I.8.20). If Scipio tried to avoid a battle during a siege, it made no sense to provoke the enemy with a duel. Dispersing the Roman troops around the city for more than nine kilometers [12. P. 115] the chances of the Numantians to break through in some parts of the defensive line of Romans increased. The archaeological data carried out by A. Schulten in Numantia at the beginning of the twentieth century allows us to reproduce the exact location of camps and forts of the Roman army. Seven camps were built in the most dangerous areas where the enemy could break through between them [4. P. 128]. Two of them were located near the Vega (north) and Molino (south) rivers flowing into the Duero. They were intended to block the waterway in order to delay any deliveries of supplies for the city [4. P. 128]. Two other forts were located between the camps on Castillejo (Scipio’s headquarters) and Travesados as well as fort Valdelilo located on the hill between Valdevorrón camp and the Merdancho river [4. P. 124]. This fortress was the closest to Numantia [4. P. 125]. Most of the Roman forts were just behind the Merdancho and Duero rivers which were also very stormy (App. Iber. 91). If a duel could take place, it was possible only on the open plateau located at the northeast or east of the city (between the camp at Castillejo and Fort Valdelilo). The defense order was determined by Scipio: the commander divided the entire line into sectors and personally appointed a commander at the head of each sector. The army was also divided into the separate units and assigned to each sector. The commander had not only to lead the siege works but also to repel enemy attacks in his sector. He also had to signal from the tower and warn the commander of an enemy attack on his sector so that he could send reinforcements (App. Iber. 90). Appian calculated that there were up to four thousand soldiers for every kilometer of the line, as much

as there were in all enemy's army [1. P. 114]. Of course, the Numantians had to concentrate at least twice as many soldiers in the breakthrough area as the defending Romans. So the area of the breakthrough had to be no more than two hundred and fifty to three hundred meters, with the number of defending Romans up to fifteen hundred which makes three cohorts plus archers and a detachment of equites [1. P. 114].

It is most likely that Marius was appointed as a commander of one of these sectors. We find a fragmentary information in Plutarch: "By temperance and endurance Marius was not inferior to common soldiers... It is most pleasant for the Roman soldiers to see their commander eating the same bread before their eyes or digging a ditch with them or building a palisade... Soldiers admire those who share their labors and dangers and love not those who let them be idle but those who willingly work with them" (Plut. Mar. 7). Although the statement refers to the time of the Jugurthine War (112–106 B.C.), this definition does not suit the commander given his status. Of course, Marius could show a master class for the populist reasons but one thing is certain: he could only have learned the art of fortification in the Numantine campaign and perhaps even earlier, when "he was beaten on the head with a knuckled stick, if the pick was lazy and the fortification was going slowly" (Iuv. VIII.240). Mention of bread is a clear allusion to Scipio, who "used to eat bread on the go, strolling with his friends" (Frontin. IV.3.9). In Sallustius' works we also find many facts concerning Marius' service at Numantia. In his speech before the people Marius boasts: "That which is much more important for the state I am trained to do, namely, to defeat the enemy, to perform guard duty, to fear nothing..., to endure cold and heat equally, to sleep on bare ground, to endure both hunger and hardship at the same time" (Sall. Bell. Iug. 85.33). Scipio had already noted this last quality in him (Plut. Mar. 3): "He had slept on the bare ground", which again refers to Scipio who slept on a mat at Numantia [2. P. 133; 14. P. 141]. During the siege the chiefs of sectors were held in maximum demand for their actions. They had to be constantly on duty with their units on the full alert, as Appian describes it, and literally to sleep on the bare ground, enduring both cold and heat and carrying constant watch duty. A. Schulten has excavated many such fortifications for sentries. They were in the shape of an ellipse 1.3 meters long, up to 80 cm wide and up to 1.6 meters deep. According to the archeologist, such large size was necessary to strengthen the vault with wooden poles [4. P. 124]. Apparently, Marius had to serve and simultaneously to rest in such "dugouts". This corresponds to the characteristic given by Plutarch to Marius, where the latter "did not avoid great labors and did not neglect small ones" (Plut. Mar. 7).

It is known that Marius was not a military tribune at Numantia (Sall. Bell. Iug. 63.4). However, according to Plutarch, Scipio "noticed and distinguished Arpinatus" (Plut. Mar. 3). One such distinction was rather the appointment to the position of chief of the sector. More than a thousand soldiers under his command

already introduced him into the rank of a primipilus (Veget. *De re mil.* II.12; Ios. Flav. *Bell. Iud.* VI.2.5) which, in turn, was an important step for an unknown rider in getting a military tribunate later [7. P. 28]. The army literally dug itself into the ground. Scipio ordered the army to issue an order to punish anyone who left their positions and returned to the camp (Frontin. II.8.7). However, unlike Marius who had to live in siege fortifications and sleep on the bare ground, the military tribunes lived in the camps where the special houses were built for them, distinguished by their thoroughness of construction [13. P. 150–151].

However, how reliable is Plutarch's version of the duel? A number of facts speak in its favor. The first of these is that he was a great man of arms, both on horseback and on foot (Plut. *Mar.* 34). He was an excellent equite (Plut. *Mar.* 3), quite hardy, brave and courageous (Plut. *Mar.* 3; Sall. *Bell. Iug.* 63.4). As the facts show, all the known fights were conducted by men of no lower horsemanship rank (Polyb. XXXV.5; Val. Max. III.2.21; Flor. I.20.5). Marius was a horseman [6. P. 18; 11. P. 67; 2. P. 143] and by all parameters he was the best candidate to take part in it. But such a duel had no sense considering the situation and Scipio's plan not to provoke the enemy (Plut. *Apophth. Scip. Min.* 20; Liv. *Per.* 57; Frontin. IV.7.16; Veget. *De re mil.* III.21). The troops were even ordered not to prevent the Numantine foragers from gathering the fodder for their horses on the neutral line (Liv. *Per.* 57). Not surprisingly, the Numantians came out of the city in droves and challenged the Romans for a fight (App. *Iber.* 90). Such a provocation might have ended in a successful breach of the enemy in parts of the defensive line, as (for example) took place in the case of Rectugen (App. *Iber.* 94; Val. Max. III.2). To prevent this from happening again, Scipio ordered to strengthen the defensive sections giving each centuria archers and slingshotters, thus preventing the enemy from approaching the Roman fortifications within two hundred meters (Frontin. IV.7.27).

Usually stories of individual duels in Rome were passed down from generation to generation over the centuries. Historians have passed down in detail not only the details of these duels but also the names of the defeated enemies (Plut. *Romul.* 16; Flor. I.8.13). Not only is the case of Marius not mentioned by other ancient historians, but the duel itself also looks very dim in comparison with others. Plutarch himself mentions it as if by the way without giving it a colorful background. It is interesting to trace Marius' own attitude toward such duels. There are two cases on this subject. One is Plutarch's account. He writes that during the Allied War (years — ?) the Italian commander Pompedius Sylon challenged Marius to go to battle with him face to face, to which he replied that "if you, Sylon, is a great commander, make me fight you against my will" (Plut. *Mar.* 33). The motive here is the same as under Numantia: if your enemies provoke you, don't respond if it not benefit for you. Classic Scipio's *modus operandi*!

The second case is found in the account of Frontinus: "Gaius Marius, when the Teutonic summoned him and demanded that he came out with him to fight,

answered that if he wanted to die, he could kill himself with a rope. And when he continued to insist, he put a weak and almost decrepit gladiator up against him and said that if he could beat him, he would fight with the victor” (Frontin. IV.7.5). Here we can clearly see Marius’ personal attitude toward jousting. Firstly, he disapproved of them and secondly, he did not consider necessary to spill the blood of a Roman soldier in vain. Here again Scipio’s motif that a commander “should command and not be a mere shirt-fighter” (Frontin. IV.7.4) is evident.

The study of military rewards in the Roman army can also provide some information. According to the established Roman tradition, a warrior was rewarded for an individual duel either with a wreath or a torques (Flor. I.8.13; Plut. Mar. 14). In his speech to the people Marius lists all the rewards: “Spears, flagon and phaleras” (Sall. Bell. Iug. 85.29). Among them, however, there are no armillas, torquets or wreaths. In the early period of Roman history there was no strict differentiation of awards into soldier and officer ones. Any soldier of Roman nationality could get an award for one and the same deed regardless of his status and rank [3. P. 27]. But the deeds were strictly differentiated and each of them was awarded with a corresponding award (Liv. XXX.13). Phaleras, for example, were awarded for courage and bravery in battle (CIL. V. 7495; see also: Ios. Flav. Bell. Iud. VII.1.3); a flag was due for good command and operational leadership during a battle. The latter were awarded only to officers (Suet. Aug. 25.3–4). However, modern researchers have come to the conclusion that in most cases junior and middle officers (up to the military tribunal) were awarded with faleras [7. P. 40]. The awards of exceptional bravery were phiale and spears (Polyb. VI.39; Liv. XXX.15; Plut. Paul. 28). According to the sources and contemporary studies these awards were given only to the middle and high-ranking officers [7. P. 40; 10. P. 213–214]. We find the details about these awards and the order in which they are awarded in the account of Polybius. Here is what he writes: “The commander... gives a spear to a soldier who wounded the enemy, a soldier who killed the enemy and took off his armor, gives a bowl if he was on foot or a horse harness if he was mounted; before, however, only a spear was given. However, these awards are given not when a soldier wounded several enemies or removed their armor in a proper battle or when capturing a city, but only when the enemies were wounded or killed in a skirmish and generally under such circumstances which in no way oblige individual soldiers to brave danger and in which soldiers of their own free will and personal prompting went into action” (Polyb. VI.35). The last remark of Polybius is very important as it speaks not about an individual duel, but about “a clash of individual soldiers who have ventured into danger”. Most likely we are talking about some kind of military raid such as a reconnaissance (or raid deep) into enemy territory or pursuit of the enemy. For such operations such groups had to have mobility and manoeuvrability.

It is known that Marius had not one but several such spears among his prizes (Sall. Bell. Iug. 85.29). It is known that Marius had not one but several

such spears among his rewards (Sall. Bell. Iug. 85.29). It suggests that he may have participated in more than one such raid, for which he was recognized and decorated. The presence of the spears also speaks about his primitive position [5. P. 87]. The army had a cavalry detachment attached to each manipula (Polyb. VI.35). In its turn, Marius had his own horse (Plut. Mar. 3). Most likely, defending his sector, he had to repel raids of the Numantians and with a group of other daredevils made dangerous raids deep into enemy territory up to the walls of Numantia, driving the enemy back into the city. Vegetius writes the following on this subject: “So that the soldiers who are busy working may not be suddenly attacked, the whole cavalry and the unoccupied part of the infantry... stand in front of the rampart armed and in full readiness to repel the enemy if he intends to make an attack” (Veget. De re mil. III.8). Of course, during such expeditions there were clashes that were more like individual fights. Apparently, a duel of this kind is reported by Plutarch.

But how could Scipio have witnessed such Marius’ raid? Appian writes that half of the perimeter of the defensive line across the river Duero was controlled by Scipio’s brother Fabius Maximus (App. Iber. 90), the other half by himself. The antique historian writes that “the commander was making rounds of the line every day and night, keeping an eye on it” (App. Iber. 93). It is possible that he happened to observe a similar raid of Marius during one of such detours. If we rely on Plutarch’s version that Scipio might for some time have been watching Marius (Plut. Mar. 3) to observe him as he “endures a change in his mode of life”, “builds a moat or puts up a palisade” with his soldiers, “sleeps on bare ground” (Plut. Mar. 7) and “carries out watch duty” (Sall. Bell. Iug. 85.33), we can say that the defense sector where Marius was located was near Scipio’s own headquarters and it was within sight. The space between the camps at Castillejo and Travesadas seems the best option. This gap was the most vulnerable point in the Roman defense system (Frontin. IV.7.16; Veget. De re mil. III.21). Judging from the damage, it was attacked many times by Celtiberians [4. P. 127]. A. Schulten discovered the ruined sections of the siege wall here [4. P. 124–128]. It is possible that Marius built it. This was the most convenient place where the Celtic soldiers could line up for a battle provoking Scipio to join the battle. Moreover, there were also the locations of his stakes. In that case, Scipio could observe all the actions of Marius from his headquarters at Castillejo. Including witnessing his famous raid (or raids) where Marius slew the enemy.

How could the legend of the duel have appeared? We think that it could have appeared after the death of Marius, most likely during Caesar’s propaganda campaign, in which he wanted to rehabilitate the name of his glorious relative after the Sullan terror (Suet. Caes. 11; Plut. Caes. 6). As a matter of fact, there are no more surviving witnesses of those events, and the individual duel which was higher in class than the ordinary skirmish, placed Marius on the same level with the great Scipio (who in his time really glorified his name

by fighting the mighty Celtiberian one-on-one with him (Polyb. XXX.5; Liv. Per. 48)). But it is possible that Plutarch simply did not go into detail about the differences between the individual duel and the duel during the raid, introducing the elementary confusion into the text, thus gave it a completely different interpretation.

References

1. Allen S., Penroz D. *Rim i ego vragi: kel'ty, germancy, karfagenyane, greki, daki, parfyane, gunny* [Rome and Its Enemies: Celts, Germans, Carthaginians, Greeks, Dacians, Parthians, Huns]. Per. O. Shmelyovoj. M.; 2014. (In Russ.).
2. Goldsworthy A. *Vo imya Rima* [In the Name of Rome]. Per. M. Alfyorovoj i M. Korolyova. M.; 2007. (In Russ.).
3. Kolobov AV. Boevy nagrady rimskih legionerov epohi Principata [Battle Awards of Roman Legionnaires of the Principate Era]. *Vestnik Permskogo universiteta*. 1998; (2): 27–33. (In Russ.).
4. Kempbell DB. *Iskusstvo osady. Znamenitye shturmy i osady Antichnosti* [The Art of Siege. The Famous Assaults and Sieges of Antiquity]. Per. O. Serebrovskoj. M.; 2008. (In Russ.).
5. Kovács P. *Hasta pura. Acta Archaeologica*. 2004;55 (№ 1–2): 81–92.
6. Labitzke M. *Marius. Der verleumdete Retter Roms*. Münster; 2012.
7. Le Boek Ya. *Rimskaya armiya epohi Rannej Imperii* [The Roman Army of the Early Empire]. Per. M.N. Chelincevoj. M.; 2001. (In Russ.).
8. Mahlayuk AV. *Rimskie vojny. Pod znakom Marsa* [Roman Wars. Under the Sign of Mars]. M; 2003. (In Russ.).
9. Mayak IL. Appian i ego Rimskaya istoriya [Appian and his Roman History] */Appian Aleksandrijskij. Rimskaya istoriya*. M.; 1998, p.624–638. (In Russ.).
10. Maxfield V. *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army*. L.; 1981.
11. Van Ooteghem J. *Gaius Marius*. Bruxelles; 1964.
12. Simon G. *Vojny Rima v Ispanii 154–133 gg. do n.e.* [The Wars of Rome in Spain 154–133 B.C.]. Per. A.V. Korolenkova. SPb.; 2008. (In Russ.).
13. Schulten A. *Numantia*. Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen 1905–1912. Bd. III. *Die Lager des Scipio*. München; 1927.
14. Truhina NN. *Politika i politiki «Zolotogo veka» rimskoj respubliki (II v. do n.e)* [Politics and Policies of the “Golden Age” of the Roman Republic (II century B.C.)]. M.; 1986. (In Russ.).
15. Ziegler K. Polybios (I). In: Paulys-Wissowa Real-Encyclopädie der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft. Hbbd. 42. 1952, p. 1440–1578.

Библиографический список

1. Аллен С., Пенроз Д. Рим и его враги: кельты, германцы, карфагеняне, греки, даки, парфяне, гунны / Пер. О. Шмелёвой. М., 2014.
2. Голдсуорти А. Во имя Рима / Пер. М. Алфёровой и М. Королёва. М., 2007.
3. Колобов А.В. Боевые награды римских легионеров эпохи Принципата // Вестник Пермского университета. 1998. Вып. 2. С. 27–33.
4. Кэмпбелл Д.Б. Искусство осады. Знаменитые штурмы и осады Античности / Пер. О. Серебровской. М., 2008.
5. Kovács P. Hasta pura // Acta Archaeologica. 2004. Vol. 55. (№ 1–2). P. 81–92.
6. Labitzke M. Marius. Der verleumdete Retter Roms. Münster, 2012.
7. Ле Боек Я. Римская армия эпохи Ранней Империи / Пер. М.Н. Челинцевой. М., 2001.
8. Махлаюк А.В. Римские войны. Под знаком Марса. М., 2003.

9. Маяк И.Л. Аппиан и его Римская история // Аппиан Александрийский. Римская история. М., 1998. С. 624–638.
10. Maxfield V. *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army*. L., 1981.
11. Van Ooteghem J. *Gaius Marius*. Bruxelles, 1964.
12. Симон Г. Войны Рима в Испании 154–133 гг. до н.э. / Пер. А.В. Короленкова. СПб., 2008.
13. Schulten A. *Numantia. Die Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen 1905–1912*. Bd. III. Die Lager des Scipio. München, 1927.
14. Трухина Н.Н. Политика и политики «Золотого века» римской республики (II в. до н.э.). М., 1986.
15. Ziegler K. Polybios (1). In: *Paulys-Wissowa Real-Encyclopädie der Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*. Hbbd. 42. 1952. Sp. 1440–1578.

Information about the author:

Merkulov Ivan Vasilievich — teacher of history and social studies, Novoanninsky city school No. 5, e-mail: Moy-school@yandex.ru.

Информация об авторе:

Меркулов Иван Васильевич — учитель истории и обществознания, Новоаннинская городская школа № 5, e-mail: Moy-school@yandex.ru.