

Sulpicius Galba and the Lusitanians

In 150 BCE, the Iberian Lusitanians had been at war with Rome for five years. During which time they had defeated Roman armies, violated agreements, and raided deep into Roman territory. Nevertheless, when the Lusitanians sought a truce, the praetor Ser. Sulpicius Galba offered fertile territory for settlement instead of harsh, punitive terms. As it turns out, the offer was disingenuous. After they were led to three predetermined locations, several thousand Lusitanians were disarmed, surrounded with a ditch, and finally killed en masse by Galba's legionaries. Any survivors were sold.¹

Mass killing on this scale would have been a considerable undertaking for a pre-modern army, and must have been the product of deliberate planning on the part of the Roman commander.² To understand why this carefully orchestrated killing took place, we must turn to the relevant ancient texts. However, the sources do little to explain Galba's decision to destroy these communities. Appian, whose account is the most detailed, infers that Galba acted out of greed, but this seems unlikely in light of the fact that the Roman praetor chose to *kill* so many Lusitanians instead of simply selling them all.³ According to Livy, Galba claimed that his actions were preemptive: he killed the Lusitanians when he learned they might be planning an attack.⁴ This is perhaps closer to the truth, given that the Lusitanians had recently broken a truce, but consideration of the larger strategic context may be helpful here.

First, it is worth noting that the Lusitanians had defeated Rome's legions in three engagements, and that Galba himself had recently lost a battle to these Iberian warriors.⁵ Furthermore, even after the Romans had defeated them in the field, captured their towns, and ravaged their lands, the Lusitanians continued to fight; they were evidently formidable. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the Lusitanians reportedly fought like guerrilla fighters, employing rapid, unexpected attacks before withdrawing to mountainous refuges—where larger armies were reluctant to follow.⁶ In short, the Romans faced a collection of Lusitanian communities that were difficult to subdue, had violated previous agreements, and excelled at guerrilla warfare. This strategic context likely incentivized mass killing when more standard Roman measures appeared to be ineffective.⁷

¹ App. *Hisp.* 59-60; Livy *Per.* 49; Val. Max. 8.1.abs.2, 9.6.2; Cic. *Brut.* 89-90; *Orat.* 227; Seut. *Galba* 3.2; Oros. 4.21.10. Valerius Maximus states that 8,000 were killed.

² For discussion of logistical issues in ancient mass killings, see Bosworth, "Massacre in the Peloponnesian War," in *Theaters of Violence: Massacre, Mass Killing and Atrocity Throughout History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012) 19-20; Zimmermann, *Gewalt: Die Dunkle Seite der Antike* (München: DVA, 2013), 178-88.

³ App. *Hisp.* 60. Note also that wars in Iberia were also notoriously unprofitable: App. *Hisp.* 54; Pliny *NH* 33.141.

⁴ Livy *Per.* 49.

⁵ App. *Hisp.* 56-58.

⁶ Diod. 5.34.4-7; Strabo 3.3.6-8, 4.15.

⁷ cf. Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay, "'Draining the Sea': Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare," *International Organization* 58, 2 (2004), 375-407; Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 156-77.