

# Viriathus

**Viriathus** (known as *Viriato* in Portuguese and Castilian) (180 BC - 139 BC) was the most important leader of the Lusitanian tribe that resisted Roman expansion into the regions of Western Iberia, where the Roman province of Lusitania would be established (in the areas comprising Portugal, south of the Douro river, and Extremadura in Spain). Viriathus led the Lusitanian guerrilla fighters to several victories over the Romans between 147 BC and 139 BC before he was betrayed to the Romans by some of his own men and killed.

## Viriathus' life

Little is known about Viriathus. He may have been a shepherd, the occupation of most of the Lusitanians. He was known among the Lusitanians as a great warrior. Many nominated him as leader, which he repeatedly refused. Some say that he lived in Loriga, *Herminius Mons*, (today's Loriga, Serra da Estrela in central Portugal) - the great fortress and heart of Lusitania. Others claim that he lived in Viseu (also in Portugal). Today, some people refer to Viseu as the "city of the Lusitanians" and Loriga as the city of Viriathus. In addition, some studies indicate that the people from this area preserve greater traces of local ethnicities. During the Roman period and afterward, many mixed marriages were made, and the population of Portugal became widely mixed, but traces of the Lusitanians persist, especially in the area of Beira Alta.

Most of his life and war against the Romans are part of legend and Portuguese national myth. Viriathus is seen as the earliest Portuguese national hero, and, since also Spain shares part of the old territory of Lusitania, he has also been a hero for Spaniards. The historian Apianus of Alexandria in his book about Iberia in part of "Historia Romana" (Roman History), commented that Viriathus *killed numerous Romans and showed great skill*.

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## Conquest of Lusitania by Rome

In the 3rd century BC, Rome started its conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. At first, things were very easy for the Romans.

The consul Servius Sulpicius Galba commanded the Roman troops in Iberia circa 150 BC and started destroying the rest of the Lusitanian resistance. Fearing the destruction of their lands, the Lusitanians send an embassy to him. Galba received the Lusitanian embassy politely, suspended the offensive and promised to give lands to the Lusitanian people.

The offer turned out to be a trap. When the unarmed Lusitanians, among them Viriathus, tried to reclaim the lands promised by Galba, many were killed. Viriathus was among those who escaped.

## Lusitanian War

Viriathus never forgot the Roman treachery. Later, when some Lusitanian leaders prepared to make a new agreement with the Romans after a major loss of lives to the Roman army of Caius Vetilius, Viriathus reminded them of Galba's trick and proposed a Lusitanian War against the Romans. The Lusitanians cried with joy.

Viriathus organized an attack against Caius Vetilius in Tribola. Since the Romans were

better armed, he organized guerrilla tactics and sprung imaginative ambushes. Charging with iron spears, tridents and roars, the Lusitanians defeated Vetilius. After him, the Lusitanians clashed with the armies of Caius Plancius, Unimanus and Caius Nigidius. To complete the pacification and humiliation of Lusitania, Rome sent Fabius Emilianus, with 15,000 soldiers and 2,000 horses to strengthen Caius Lelius. The Romans lost most of these reinforcements in Ossuma. When Emilianus risked combat again, he was totally defeated near what is today the city of Beja in Alentejo. This defeat gave the Lusitanians access to today's Spanish territory, modern Granada and Murcia. Learning of these events, Rome sent one of its best generals, Servilius Cipianus, to Iberia. Near Sierra Morena, the Romans fell into a Lusitanian ambush. Viriathus did not harm the Romans and let the soldiers and Servilianus go. Servilianus declared Viriathus to be a "Friend of Rome" and recognized the Lusitanian rule over their own lands.

### **Viriathus' Death**

The Roman senate did not accept the treaty made by Servilius Cipianus with the Lusitanians. However, the Romans did things differently this time. Knowing that the Lusitanian resistance was largely due to Viriathus' leadership, Marcus Pompilius Lenas

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bribed Audax, Ditalcus and Minurus, three Lusitanians sent by Viriathus as an embassy to establish peace. These ambassadors returned to their camp and killed Viriathus while he was sleeping. When they returned to the Roman camp for their reward, the consul Servilius Cipianus ordered their execution, declaring, "Rome does not pay traitors". With the death of Virathus, the Lusitanian resistance began to end, although total pacification of Lusitania was only achieved under Augustus. Under Roman rule, Lusitania and its people gradually acquired Roman culture and language.

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