

The death of Hannibal in Silius Italicus, *Punica* 2.696-707

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Language: English

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Abstract:

At three pivotal moments in his *Punica*, the Flavian epic about Rome’s victory over Carthage in the Second Punic War (219/218-201 B.C.), Silius Italicus looks ahead to Hannibal’s suicide at the court of Prusias in Bithynia: in his own epilogue on the fall of Saguntum (2.696-707); in Bostar’s report back from the oracle of Hammon in the Siwa Oasis (3.692-714); and in the Sibyl’s prophetic vision during Scipio’s *nekyia* / *katabasis* (13.868-895). Significantly, each of these passages marks the conclusion of the book in which it appears—just as Hannibal’s death marks the conclusion of both his own life and, accordingly, a major chapter in Roman history. In this paper, I will focus on the first of these three passages (2.696-707). I will illustrate the depth and skill of Silius’ engagement with his literary predecessors through a close reading of the lines: in particular, I will show how Silius mediates his engagement with the description of the death of Turnus in Vergil (*Aen.* 12.950-952, at the conclusion of the book, as well as the poem) through a reading of another description of the death of Hannibal, in Cornelius Severus (*FLP* 13.24-25).

In 2.696-707, Silius composes his prophecy on the death of Hannibal through a skillful adaptation of the language and imagery which Vergil uses to depict the death of Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid*: *saepe Saguntinis somnos exterritus umbris / optabit cecidisse manu, ferroque negato / invictus quondam Stygias bellator ad undas / deformata feret liventi membra veneno, Pun.* 2.704-707 ~ *hoc dicens ferrum adverso sub pectore condit / fervidus; ast illi solvuntur frigore membra / vitaeque cum gemitu fugit indignata sub umbras, Aen.* 12.950-952. In general, both men perish and then descend into the Underworld (cf. *Stygias ... ad undas, Pun.* 2.706 ~ *sub umbras, Aen.* 12.952), and both poets focus their attention on the “limbs” (*membra, Pun.* 2.707 ~ *membra, Aen.* 12.951) of the fallen combatant. Silius further marks his engagement with Vergil

in the metrical adaptation of verse-final *indignata sub umbras* (*Aen.* 12.952, with *indignata* as a feminine nominative singular adjective modifying *vita*) across the verse-boundary in *ad undas / deformata* (*Pun.* 2.706-707, with *deformata* as a neuter accusative plural adjective modifying *membra*, cf. *umbris*, *Pun.* 2.704 ~ *umbras*, *Aen.* 12.952, both verse-final). However, whereas Turnus dies when Aeneas buries his “sword” (*ferrum*, *Aen.* 12.950) in his breast, Hannibal will enjoy no such glorious death in the heat of battle, “with the sword denied him” (*ferroque negato*, *Pun.* 2.705). After casting Hannibal as a new Achilles in the narrative of his single combat with the Saguntine Murrus on the first day of the siege (1.271-555), Silius now casts the Carthaginian as a new Hector – that is, as a new Turnus – in his prophecy on the general’s later suicide.

In order to fully appreciate the depth and skill of this intertextual gesture, however, it is necessary to understand how Silius mediates his engagement with Vergil through a reading of another description of the death of Hannibal, that in Cornelius Severus: *nostraeque cadens ferus Hannibal irae / membra tamen Stygias tulit inviolata sub umbras* (*FLP* 13.24-25). In general, Severus carefully patterns these verses after the closing lines of the *Aeneid* (cf. *membra*, *FLP* 13.24 ~ *membra*, *Aen.* 12.951; *tulit*, *FLP* 13.25 ~ *fugit*, *Aen.* 12.952; and *inviolata sub umbras*, *FLP* 13.25 ~ *indignata sub umbras*, *Aen.* 12.952). Thus, Silius evidently appears to owe the idea of connecting the death of Hannibal with the death of Turnus to Severus (cf. *Stygias ... ad undas*, *Pun.* 2.706 ~ *Stygias ... sub umbras*, *FLP* 13.25 ~ *sub umbras*, *Aen.* 12.952). Interestingly, Silius further marks his engagement with Severus by correcting his claim that Hannibal “nevertheless bore his limbs unharmed down to the Stygian shades” (*membra tamen Stygias tulit inviolata sub umbras*, *FLP* 13.25) not once but twice: *invictus quondam Stygias bellator ad undas / deformata feret liventi membra veneno* (*Pun.* 2.706-707, cf. *tulit* ~ *feret* and *inviolata* ~ *deformata ... liventi ... veneno*) and “*ne metue!*” *exclamat vates. “non vita sequetur / inviolata virum* [i.e., Hannibal] (*Pun.* 13.874-875, cf. *non ... / inviolata* ~ *inviolata*, *FLP* 13.25 and *vita ... / inviolata* ~ *vitaque ... indignata*, *Aen.* 12.952). It is equally clear that Severus has read his Vergil, and that Silius has read both his Severus and his Vergil.