CHAPTER THREE

SILIUS ITALICUS: A CONSULAR HISTORIAN?

Bruce Gibson*

1. Introduction

In the introduction to the first volume of his commentary on Silius Italicus, François Spaltenstein voices, amongst other concerns, his frustration with those scholars who have approached Silius’ work as if it were some kind of historical source for the Second Punic War between Rome and Carthage. A series of memorable and trenchant aperçus are used to reject any such possibility, as the example below illustrates:

Pour parler net, Silius est tout sauf un historien, car il n’en a pas les intentions, et cela même si sa matière est historique. C’est là que se sont trompés trop de critiques, qui n’ont pas distingué entre la matière brute du texte et l’intention de l’auteur.1

It is understandable for Spaltenstein to have expressed irritation at those who treat Silius as if he were an ancient historian, but what perhaps needs some modification here is the conception not of the epic poet, but of the historian. It would be unfair to blame Spaltenstein for having published the first part of his commentary before A. J. Woodman’s Rhetoric in Classical Historiography (1988), which has had a fairly dramatic effect on the way in which ancient historiography is studied. Viewed from a perspective which sees ancient historical texts as something rather different from the work of modern academic historians, however, Silius and ancient historiography may not in fact be so far removed from each other after all.2 Hence the slightly paradoxical title

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1 Spaltenstein (1986) xiii.
2 Note, for instance, Quintilian’s well-known description of historia as a carmen solutum (“prose poem,” Inst. 10.1.31); for a classic modern discussion of ancient poetry and historiography, see Wiseman (1979) 143–53, 170–71. Indeed Spaltenstein (2006)
of this essay, where the phrase “consular historian,” so often used of a figure like Silius’ contemporary, Cornelius Tacitus, is a preliminary to asking the question: to what extent might the work of Silius, the longest survivor from the consuls of Nero’s reign (Plin. Ep. 3.7.9–11), evoke and draw on the practices of historiography? In terms of contents, after a brief consideration of his approaches to his main source, Livy, this paper will address Silius not so much from the point of view of Quellenforschung, but from the perspective of Silius’ adoption of historiographical motifs and techniques, to show how Silius can exploit the modes of historiographical presentation in an epic poem. This study will move on to the issues of grandeur and scale, before examining in depth Silius’ digression on Sicily at the start of book 14. The final topic to be covered, briefly, will be Silius’ approach to speeches. I hope to show how the techniques of historiography are a fundamental part of Silius’ work: as well as seeing him in poetic terms, in terms of the self-affiliation with Virgil (and hence with poetry), as famously described in Pliny’s letter (Ep. 3.7.8), readers of Silius should be open to his exploitation of historiographical predecessors and indeed other prose authors as well.5

2. Silius and his sources: Some observations on method

On the question of the source texts used by Silius, the work of Nicol and other scholars is fundamental, demonstrating how similarities with Livy (and other texts) permit one to say that Silius has carefully appears implicitly to recognize this difference, and moreover emphasizes the role of topoi in historical writing: note too his explanation (718) that it is wrong to look for historical evidence in Silius “...parce que Silius ne s’intéressait pas à l’histoire, du moins pas à l’histoire comme les historiens modernes la conçoivent.”

3 The phrase is associated with Ronald Syme; e.g., Syme (1951) 196, (1956) 17, and (1958) 760: “It is also fanciful to discard a consular historian in favour of ephemeral arrangements, dutifully commemorated on tablets of bronze by the loyal zeal of small towns.” The phrase has been used by later scholars in relation to other historians as well: see e.g., Levick (1976) 292 n. 54 (of Servilianus Nonianus), Swan (2004) 59 (of Dio Cassius).

4 There were 17th-century editions of the poem whose titles referred to Silii Italici uiri consularis; see von Albrecht (1964) 217. Note too the Dissertatio de Silio Italico poeta consulari of C. Cellarius (Halle 1694).

5 Cf. Gibson (2005) for an examination of the fusion of poetic and historiographical concerns in Silius’ treatment of Hannibal’s visit to Gades (Pun. 3.1–60), as well as Manolaraki’s essay in this volume on seascapes (293–321).