The Flavian period is particularly rich and exciting for the study of epic because we have three extant poems written within a few years of each other. Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*, Statius’ *Thebaid*, and Silius Italicus’ *Punica* were all products of Vespasianic to Domitianic Rome. Since it takes a long time to write an epic, they may even have overlapped with each other in the composition process. This paper aims to stimulate thoughts about the relationship between Silius and Statius, using the games in *Punica* 16 as a case study. Epic games are self-conscious sites of poetic competition, as I have shown in my study of Statius’ games.¹ Statius and Silius set themselves up in competition with Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and Valerius Flaccus among others in writing their versions of this set-piece of the epic genre. The games are a particularly good place to analyze the interplay of contemporary texts in the same genre.

Statius and Silius are generally assumed to have been writing at roughly the same time. Dating poetry is an inexact science: ancient biographical traditions go from unreliable to pure fiction; poets themselves love to create images of their lives and times that put self-presentation above the needs of the future literary historian. Coleman lays out the arguments for the dating of various events in Statius’ life.² The main argument for the completion of the *Thebaid* is that the proem mentions only the first two of Domitian’s military expeditions and not the Sarmatae, whom Domitian defeated in January of AD 93. For the question of when Statius began composition of his version of the Seven against Thebes, we have his reference to the poem in its epilogue as “much watched-over through twelve years” (*o mihi

¹ Lovatt (2005).
Though we might want to insert a caveat to the effect that twelve years for twelve books sounds suspiciously neat, we can place the composition of the *Thebaid* with a degree of plausibility during AD 80–92. Silius, however, is not so securely datable. Pliny’s *Epistle* 3.7 tells us that Silius starved himself to death in AD 101 (which gives us a *terminus ante quem*) and that he retired from political life in the late 70s. The general consensus seems to be that Silius was writing later than Statius, but that the composition of the two poems may well have coincided. Completion or publication may not have been necessary for Silius and Statius to have been aware of each other’s work: the practice of reciting parts of not yet completed poems would have given them opportunities to interact. And if like Virgil, as Donatus’ *Vita* says, Statius and Silius did not necessarily compose the poems in chronological order, we cannot securely argue that Silius’ games must be later because they occur later in his epic. So what can we learn from comparing and contrasting the two texts themselves? Is Statius always in the lead or does Silius sometimes overtake?

The methodological problems behind this task are complex: first, there are no clear rules for determining when a similarity is an allusion.

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3 In *Sil. 3.5*, the poem which he writes to his wife asking her to move to Naples with him, he also talks of his long labor over the poem (*longi tu sola laboris conscia, cumque tuis creuit mea Thebais annis*), “you alone were aware of my long labour, when my *Thebaid* grew during your years.” 3.5.35–36.


5 On Pliny and Silius, see now Henderson (2002) 102–24; see also Augoustakis (5–6) and Dominik (428–31) in this volume.

6 Wistrand (1956) argues from Martial that Silius must have written the entire epic between 88 and 93; Juhnke (1972) 12–13 leaves aside the question of the relationship between the two epics, but states that the two river battles should be read in the order Silius-Statius, because the fourth book of the *Punica* was written in AD 84 and the ninth book of the *Thebaid* in 88 (but how does he know these things?). McGuire (1997), who reads the three epics together, works from the starting-point that Silius is bringing up the rear. On chronology he concludes that “Silius was at least reading from his work in the early 90s AD, and that a publication date from the mid-90s to around 100 is probable” (14).

7 Although Silius’ games are in the penultimate book of his poem, while Statius’ games come earlier, there is no guarantee that the poems were written in order.

8 *Vit. Verg.* 23–24. Though the evidence of Statius’ *Achilleid*, stuck at the first turning-post and unfinished at a book and a half, suggests that Statius did compose in order—at least for the *Achilleid*. There is not much evidence about Silius’ method of composition, which is the key here, since his games come later than Statius’ in terms of book order.