17. HANNIBAL AT THE GATES:
PROGRAMMATISING ROME AND ROMANTAS
IN SILIUS ITALICUS’ PUNICA 1 AND 2

William J. Dominik

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

('T. S. Eliot, ‘Four Quartets’)

Silius, no less than Virgil and other imperial poets, is a master of epic beginnings. Scholars have devoted much discussion to the prefaces and introductory scenes of imperial epic, especially their programmatic aspects, but this treatment has not extended to the same degree to the Flavian epicists, except in the case of Statius. Given the long and complex nature of the Punicæ, the reader should perhaps not be surprised that this programmatic episode extends over two books (1.271–2.707). The episode is itself an epic within an epic, a self-contained narrative that connects with other scenes in the Punicæ. This recognition is crucial to understanding the programmatic function of the Saguntum episode. As in the Punicæ as a whole, there are deeds of heroism in battle, interventions by gods, and all the other narrative components of epic generally. Silius’ treatment of the Saguntum episode foreshadows his narrative strategy in much of the rest of the Punicæ. It directs the reader to the Punicæ’s levels of narrative, introduces the reader to the main themes and figures of the epic, provides guidelines for reading and understanding.

---

the text, and establishes the main narrative mode whereby he epi-
cises the past to represent the reality of Rome and Romanitas.

**Plataea: Thucydidean Analogue**

Thucydides records that in 431 BCE the Thebans sent a small force
to Plataea and with the assistance of a group of wealthy, disgrun-
tled Plataeans took the city by surprise (2.2). After the Plataeans
recognised their superior numbers, they turned upon the Thebans,
who were compelled to surrender themselves and their arms (2.3–4).
The Peloponnesians sent a larger force to besiege the city, where-
upon the Plataeans promptly asked for assistance from their ally
Athens and undertook to resist the siege (2.71–8). While some of the
inhabitants managed to escape to Athens, the survivors put up a
spirited defence but were forced to surrender in 427 BCE (3.20–4,
52). The siege of Plataea marked the beginning of the Peloponnesian
war. The memory of this siege is evoked in the opening episode of
SiliusItalicus’ *Punica*, which features the Carthaginian siege of Saguntum
and the Roman response to this aggression (1.271–2.707). Livy relates
that Hannibal laid siege to the small city of Saguntum on the south-
ern coast of Spain in 219 BCE (21.6; cf. Polyb. 3.6), which was a lit-
tle over two centuries after the Plataean episode. Saguntum was
eventually stormed and sacked after eight months. Historically the
episode was pivotal since it marked the start of the second Punic
war between Rome and Carthage. Just as Thucydides relates at the
beginning of his history that the Peloponnesian war ‘would be a
great war and more worthy of mention than any wars that had pre-
ceded it’ (μέγαν τε ἔσεσθαι καὶ ἀξιολογώτατον τῶν προγεγενημένον,
1.1), Livy describes the second Punic war as ‘the most memorable
of all wars by far ever waged’ (*bellum maxime omnium memorabile, quae
umquam gesta sint*, 21.1). Mythically, of course, not even the first Punic
war represents the first stage of the confrontation between Rome
and Carthage: Aeneas’ betrayal of Dido famously claims that dis-
tinction and prefigures Hannibal.

---

4 The Saguntum episode is preceded by a long preliminary section providing the
background of the war and the cruel and bellicose character of the Carthaginians
and of Hannibal (*Pun. 1.1–270*).