The Cannae episode of Silius Italicus’ *Punica* 8–10 takes up and elaborates upon the epic’s opening episode, which introduces the major themes, images and figures of the epic. The Saguntum episode, which comprises *Punica* 1–2, functions programmatically by directing the reader to the *Punica*’s levels of narrative, by providing guidelines for reading and understanding the text, and by establishing the main narrative mode whereby Silius epicises the past to represent the reality of Rome. In the Saguntum episode the idea of Rome and her ideal qualities are articulated programmatically to provide a conceptual framework for reading the epic narrative in a way that undercuts Rome’s ideal image of itself as an active moral force. Silius’ treatment of the Cannae episode, which forms the narrative focal point of the *Punica*, bears narrative testimony.

The Saguntum episode makes clear that the *Punica* is to be read in conjunction with republican and other imperial texts. The reader is encouraged from the very beginning of the *Punica* to read the narrative through such writers as Homer, Ennius, Virgil, Livy, Ovid, Lucan and Statius. Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Lucan’s *Bellum Ciuile* and Statius’ *Thebaid* provide illuminating contexts for reading the *Punica*. The *Punica*, like the *Aeneid*, narrates a story moving from military annihilation to geo-political hegemony; like *Bellum Ciuile*, an account of political dissolution arising from military victory; and like the *Thebaid*, a story of the abuse of power leading to social disintegration. While *Bellum Ciuile* looks back upon the second Punic war, the *Thebaid* and *Aeneid* look forward to the time of the war. Despite the different perspectives of the narratives, the victims of the wars described in these epics endure a fate similar to the victims of the republican civil wars alluded to in *Punica* 13.853–67.

The opening episode of the *Punica* shows that the origins of Rome’s moral and civil decline are apparent from the outset of the war since the Saguntines’ devotion to the Roman ideals of *fides* and *pietas*
results in their abandonment by Rome and the destruction of their city. In this episode Saguntum is depicted as a surrogate Rome and the citizens’ embodiment of fides and pietas is portrayed as being morally useless and politically calamitous. Rome survives to fight another day, but her geopolitical self-interest, martial fervour, diplomatic belligerence and lack of human compassion allow her to triumph and to maintain her hegemony over her allies and rivals. This is the true index of Rome and the reader is encouraged to look for other examples of these qualities throughout the Punica. Such instances abound in the Cannae episode.

1.

The Cannae narrative in Punica 8–10 enhances the same unflattering implied commentary on Flavian Rome that is established in the programmatic episode of Punica 1–2. Right at the narrative heart of the episode and epic Silius reinvokes the Muses by asking: tantumne datis confidere linguae, l ut Cannas uno ore sonem? (“Do you entrust me with such bold speech that I can sing of Cannae with one voice?”, 9.342–3). The Cannae narrative, as the Saguntum episode and the Punica do as a whole, invites a polysemous reading. The programmatic proem of the Punica (1.1–16) proclaims the second Punic war as its subject and suggests that the qualities that made Rome a great power have deserted her citizens: obsessa Palatia uallo / Poenorum, ac muris defendit Roma salutem (“the Palatine was besieged by a rampart of the Phoenicians [i.e. Carthaginians] and Rome defended her safety by walls”, 15–6). Similarly the battle of Cannae and its result is presaged by Juno early in the Punica: “dum Cannas, tumulum Hesperiae campumque cruore / Ausonio mersum sublimis Iapyga cernam” (“I shall see from heaven Cannae, the grave of Hesperia [i.e. Italy], and the Iapygian plain flooded with Ausonian [i.e. Roman] blood”, 50–1). The Saguntum and Cannae episodes both suggest that the origins of the Roman propensity for civil strife lay in the events of the second Punic war.

The Cannae episode itself is framed by two significant passages suggesting this unflattering commentary on Flavian Rome: the election of the demagogue Varro to the consulship (Sil. 8.243–57), which is por-

---

1 The text used of Silius Italicus’ Punica is that of Delz 1987. All other citations are from the Teubner editions.