CHAPTER SEVEN
FROM SALLUST TO SILIUS ITALICUS:
METVS HOSTILIS AND THE
FALL OF ROME IN THE PUNICA’

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Introduction: From Sallust to Silius Italicus

The notion that Rome benefitted from the ‘fear’ of a strong external ‘enemy’ (metus hostilis) may have originated in the debate in the Roman Senate between M. Porcius Cato and P. Cornelius Scipio Nasica over the fate of Carthage just before the outbreak of the Third Punic War in 149 BC.¹ Cato is said to have argued that the city “must be destroyed” (Carthago delenda est), while Scipio is said to have countered that the city “must be preserved” (Carthago servanda est). In reality, this debate concerned not the fate of Carthage, but that of Rome: the point at issue was whether Rome needed to destroy or to preserve Carthage in order to preserve her own existence. In essence, this metus hostilis functioned according to the law of reciprocity, which, in this case, predicated that the two cities must either stand or fall together. (Scipio was right, not Cato.) This law of reciprocity is itself reflected in the inherent grammatical ambivalence of the phrase metus hostilis, since the adjective bears both an active and a passive sense, as evidenced by A. Gellius’ explanation of the subjective and objective uses of the genitive in the grammatically equivalent phrase metus hostium (9.12.13): nam ‘metus hostium’ recte dicitur, et cum timent hostes et cum timentur (“For, the phrase metus hostium ['fear of the enemies'] is correctly said, both when the enemies fear and when they are feared,” cf. 9.12.13–16 in general).

¹ I would like to thank the conference participants for their insightful remarks and comments during the session.

¹ The many problems surrounding the historicity of this debate have long attracted the attention of scholars, including Gelzer (1931); Little (1934); Adcock (1946); Thürlemann-Rapperswil (1974); Vogel-Weidemann (1989); and Welwei (1989).
Whatever its origins, the *metus hostilis* became a powerful cultural idea, with deep roots in ancient political theory, as well as in ancient conceptions about the rise and fall of states (e.g. Plb. 6.57.1–9). In its evolution, separate phases came to be identified, beginning with the *metus Etruscus* under the Monarchy, and continuing with the *metus Gallicus* and the *metus Punicus* under the Republic. It is Sallust, however, who codifies the *metus hostilis* as the central force in the history, as well as in the historiography, of the *imperium Romanum*, in a series of passages which span all three of his major works, including the *Catiline* (6–13), the *Jugurtha* (41–42), and the *Histories* (1.11–16 Maurenbrecher). Through his analysis of the rise and fall of Rome, Sallust traces the city’s descent from *virtus* into *luxuria*, and directly associates this moral and political decline with the fall of Carthage at the end of the Third Punic War in 146 BC. Indeed, in all three passages, Sallust famously identifies this event as the *περιπέτεια* or ‘turning point’ in the history (and historiography) of the *res publica*. In assigning the fall of Carthage this honor, he capitalizes on the fundamental paradox that it was Rome’s victory over Carthage in *bellum externum* which put the city on the path to (self-inflicted, i.e. suicidal) defeat in *bellum civile*.

Sallust’s presentation of the *metus hostilis*, especially his identification of the fall of Carthage in 146 BC as the *περιπέτεια*, looms large in all subsequent historiography. In the absence of Livy’s sixth decade, his narrative of the fall of Carthage and its effect on Rome, it is impossible to ascertain what Livy made of Sallust’s argument. However, the fall of the city does begin the sixth decade, just as the fall of Saguntum (at the beginning of the Second Punic War in 218 BC) begins the third: this structural parallel suggests at least the possibility of a thematic parallel between the two sieges. Elsewhere, Livy identifies other events as ‘turning points’ in

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2 For the *metus hostilis* in general, see Bellen (1985).
4 *Cat.* 10, esp. 10.1 (Carthago aemula imperi Romani ab stirpe interiit), cf. 11, esp. 11.4–8; *Jug.* 41.1–5, esp. 41.2 (ante Carthaginem deletam and metus hostilis in bonis artibus civitatem retinebat) ~ 41.3 (sed ubi illa formido mentibus decessit, . . .); and *Hist.* 1.11 (post Carthaginis excidium) and 1.12 (postquam remoto metu Punico), cf. 1.16 (ex quo tempore) ~ *Cat.* 11.4–8.
5 The later periocha for Book 51 offers a brief narrative of the event, but no interpretation of it.
6 Interestingly, the *periocha* for Book 21 uses exactly the same language to describe the siege and fall of Saguntum as that which the *periocha* for Book 51 uses to describe the siege and fall of Carthage: *belli Punici secundi ortum narrat et Hannibalis, ducis Poenorum, contra foedus per Hiberum flumen transitum. a quo* *Saguntum,* (sociorum)