

Corpse Abuse in Silius' *Punica*: Saguntum, Beyond Troy and Latium

The most graphic scenes of corpse abuse in Silius Italicus' *Punica* come in swift succession during the siege of Saguntum in book 2. In the first, Asbyte, an Amazonian style virgin-warrior modeled on Penthesilea and Camilla, is killed and decapitated, and her head thrust onto a pike by Theron, the Herculean defender/priest of Saguntum (*Pun.* 2.188-207). He in turn is killed by Hannibal, as recompense for the murder and abuse of Asbyte, and his body mutilated and left for the Hiberian birds to devour (208-269).

My interests here concern Silius' complex engagement with similar scenes of corpse abuse in Homer and Virgil, but specifically the ways in which Silius outstrips his predecessors in brutality. The *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* engage corpse abuse through veiled allusion, threats/boasts, implicit staging, and failed attempts. We might recall, e.g., Achilles' attempted abuse of Hector's corpse which is everywhere checked by the intervention of the gods, who ensure the body remains intact for proper burial (*Il.* 23.184-87, 23.190-91, 24.20-21, 24.411-23). While Virgil allows his heroes a larger range of *post mortem* abuse, his narrative avoids the physical description of even the mutilations we know have occurred: consider the narrative gap of Priam's decapitation at *Aen.* 2.550-58, or Mezentius' perforated breastplate at the start of book 11. Virgil's silence in revealing the action of abuse betrays the limits of his willingness to inject overt corpse maltreatment into his narrative. This hesitation is, emphatically, not an issue for Silius.

Silius stages these and other scenes from Homer and Virgil in order to bring them to their logical and gruesome conclusion, to reconstitute what has been "expurgated," so to speak. Hannibal, then, is re-imagined as a victorious Achilles-Aeneas but, unlike his models, he is granted the freedom to mutilate his defeated enemy. But Silius' intertextual engagement is more

complex than this. Hannibal is ultimately an epic “loser,” his defeat inevitable, at least by historical standards. In this way he is more naturally a recasting of Hector or Turnus (his association with and avenging of the “Amazonian” Asbythe goes a long way towards solidifying this connection with other epic “losers”). The siege of Saguntum is a resounding victory for Hannibal, but even in victory is a reminder/premonition of his ultimate defeat. The lasting image of the sack of Saguntum is not one of promise and joy for the Carthaginian leader, but of defeat and death (2.699-707). Silius imagines the deformed corpse of Hannibal in the last line of the book (*deformata membra*, 2.707), not those of his defeated enemies. In his first major victory there is an immediate anticipation of his ultimate failure, and this tension between his role as victor and vanquished is captured in the splitting of his character’s intertextual models between epic winners and losers: Hannibal is always at once both sides of the coin. His *deformata membra* (2.707) recall Theron’s *deforme cadaver* (2.269) moments after the latter has accomplished his greatest victory in slaying Asbythe. Similarly, as Hannibal will learn, in the *Punica* victory is never far from defeat.

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