

Giants of the Past: Compressive History in the Duel of Scipio and Crixus in *Punica* 4

The battle scenes of Silius Italicus' *Punica* make up more than twenty percent of the Flavian poet's epic, 2,461 (counting only the major scenes) of the poem's roughly 12,000 lines. Yet, few works in the now flourishing field of Flavian scholarship approach these passages as worthy of extended study. This paper proposes that the battle scenes of the *Punica* are far more important than presently thought and offers a scene from the battle of Ticinus in book four as a test case for a new reading of the Silian battlefield.

At the midpoint of the battle of Ticinus in *Punica* 4, the consul Scipio (father to the future Africanus) challenges the Gallic chieftain Crixus to a duel. In so doing, Silius activates a number of important resonances from Roman history and myth, creating a nexus of allusions that elevates this short duel into a highly symbolic reenactment of the Roman past and counterfactual representation of the near future. I argue that Silius conceptualizes these early defeats through allusions to mytho-historical moments of Roman victories. I approach this duel through the lens of three important moments: the sack of Rome after the battle of Allia in 390 BC, the Spartacus revolt in the late 70s BC, and the Titanomachy of myth.

The sack of Rome by Brennus and the Gauls in 390 BC is directly referenced in the description of Crixus' shield (*Pun.* 4.152-53: *vertice sacro / pensantes aurum Celtas umbone gerebat*). So Ticinus becomes a replay of Allia, that *dies ater* that nearly led to the destruction of the City; Crixus becomes, as he loudly boasts, a second Brennus and Scipio, consequently, a second Camillus – with all the imperial symbolism that must relate. Brennus-Crixus is symbolically defeated by Camillus-Scipio and so the defeat at Ticinus is partially nullified by a reference to a previous Roman victory over a barbarian invasion. However, a reading of Crixus'

shield must also contain shades of the more recent attack on the Capitoline in 69 AD, an event that occurred within Silius' lifetime and which is compared by Tacitus to the Gallic sack (*Hist.* 3.72). Silius reinterprets the defeat at Ticinus as civil war violence, a technique that has been much explored recently in the Flavian epics (McGuire 1997, McNelis 2007, Marks 2009). However, Silius must be very careful how he employs this potent imagery, since the burning of the Capitoline occurred during the violence that brought the Flavians to power.

Civil war violence leads us also to the Spartacus revolt of the 70s BC. Here, Silius employs his clever use of nomenclature (explored elsewhere by McGuire 1995, Augoustakis 2005, and Cowan 2009) to connect Crixus to the Spartacan general of the same name, who was defeated by a Roman consul near Mt. Garganus. Cementing the connection, Silius includes the detail of Scipio's horse's name, 'Garganus,' just prior to the duel. Our perspective of the duel has been augmented again, now becoming a replay of the battle between Crixus and the Romans in 72 BC – another reenactment of Roman forces crushing barbarian disorder. Further complicating matters, Silius frequently refers to the battle of Cannae as taking place on the 'fields of Garganus' (cf. *Pun.* 9.483: *Gargani ferventia caedibus arva*). Here we come to Silius' 'poetics of contingency' (Cowan 2010), in which Silius portrays an alternate outcome to the disaster of Cannae: Scipio defeats Crixus-Hannibal.

Finally, the duel is elevated to mythic terms when Crixus is described as the Titan Mimas (*Pun.* 4.275-76: *quantus Phlegraeis Telluris alumnus in arvis / movit signa Mimas*). Now, Scipio becomes a victorious Jupiter crushing the forces of cosmic disorder, foreshadowing the appearance of the real god at the end of the battle and the revelation of his paternity (*Pun.* 4.476: *vera Iovis proles*). Through the compression of history, Scipio and Crixus become multi-layered

and highly complex figures; Camillus and Brennus, Spartacus, Hannibal, and even Jupiter and the Titans lurk in the background of this short duel in the fourth book of the *Punica*.

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