The Treatment of Virtue in Silius Italicus’ *Punica*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the treatment of virtue in Silius Italicus’ *Punica*, particularly at three key points in the epic, the battles of Saguntum, Cannae and Zama, which form the beginning, middle and end of the poem. I argue that Silius writes the *Punica* with a particular moral message in mind, a message that can be discerned through the analysis of the models of virtue demonstrated by the *Punica*’s characters at these points in the epic. Silius depicts an imperfect model of virtue through the Saguntines’ brutal mass suicide. The Saguntines believe that they should be virtuous by remaining loyal to Rome, but they act through a misguided notion of *fides* that causes them to commit impious crimes. Virtue also plays a key role in Silius’ Cannae narrative, as his conception of Cannae as a paradoxical turning point in Rome’s history is reflected through the paradoxical nature of virtue that he depicts at Cannae. The contradictory role that virtue plays at Cannae is most apparent in Silius’ portrayal of the two consuls Varro and Paulus. Even though Varro acts without virtue and Paulus seemingly acts according to it, Varro ultimately does more good for Rome than the heroic Paulus. The models of virtue seen at Saguntum and Cannae are connected to the failures that the Saguntines and Romans suffer on the battlefield, but Silius depicts a much more appealing model of virtue by the end of the epic, which leads to Rome’s victory at Zama. This victory is due entirely to Rome’s ability to finally adopt a model of moral behaviour that balances both *fides* and *pietas*. At Zama, Scipio leads the Romans by providing a moral example for all to follow. Ultimately, it is Scipio’s moral behaviour that Silius endorses, by making it the true cause of Rome’s victory over Carthage.
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