

HANNIBAL IN SILIUS ITALICUS

Arianna Sacerdoti¹

¹*Dipartimento di Lettere e Beni culturali dell'Università della Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli".*

Received: 22/06/2020

Accepted for Publication: 01/07/2020

Published: 10/07/2020

Abstract

This essay analyzes, in its entirety, the figure of Hannibal in Silius Italicus, looking at thematic, stylistic, and lexical aspects. At the very beginning, specific focus is given on Hannibal in Livy, while later there is a focus on an original aspect, not studied by Scholarship yet, which is the role of sleeplessness and dreams in the character's building. Secondary Literature is provided.

Keywords: Carthaginian dux, Silius Italicus, Epiphanic, Matier, Punica

Introduction

In the twenty-first and twenty-second book of *Ab urbe condita libri* (one of Silius Italicus's literary templates), Livy introduces the character of Hannibal. He does so not in one passage, but in various sections, spreading references to the Carthaginian dux throughout the text; the main portrait of the general is, however, at the beginning of the book, as it happens also in Silius Italicus's *Punica*.

In Livy, Hannibal obtains sympathies and favors from the army, when he is sent to Spain (paragraph 4), because the strength in his face and his fiery eyes remind everyone of the young Hamilcar (Livy, *Hist.* 21, 4, 2 «*eundem vigorem in voltu vimque in oculis, habitum oris lineamentaue intueri*»); 'he had the same energy in his face and the same boldness in his eyes, in his appearance and in his features'²). In the same paragraph, later on, the portrait grows in detail (Livy. *Hist.* 21, 4, 5-10):

Plurimum audaciae ad pericula capessenda, plurimum consilii inter ipsa pericula erat. Nullo labore aut corpus fatigari aut animus vinci poterat. Caloris ac frigoris patientia par; cibi potionisque desiderio naturali, non voluptate modus finitus; vigiliarum somnique nec die nec nocte discriminata tempora; id quod gerendis rebus superesset quieti datum; ea neque molli strato neque silentio accersita; multi saepe militaris agulo opertum humi iacentem inter custodias stationesque militum conspexerunt. Vestitus nihil inter aequales excellens: arma atque equi conspiciebantur. Equitum peditumque idem longe primus erat; princeps in proelium ibat, ultimus conserto proelio excedebat. Has tantas viri virtutes ingentia vitia aequabant, inhumana crudelitas, perfidia plus quam Punica, nihil veri, nihil sancti, nullus deum metus, nullum ius iurandum, nulla religio. Cum hac indole virtutum atque vitiorum triennio sub Hasdrubale imperatore meruit, nulla re quae agenda videndaque magno futuro duci esset praetermissa.

²All the English translations from Livy are my own.

‘He was fearless in exposing himself to danger and perfectly self-possessed in the presence of danger. No amount of exertion could cause him either bodily or mental fatigue, nor there could be limits to his courage. he was equally indifferent to heat and cold; his eating and drinking were measured by the needs of nature, not by appetite; his hours of sleep were not determined by day or night, whatever time was not taken up with active duties was given to sleep and rest, but that rest was not wooed on a soft couch or in silence, men often saw him lying on the ground amongst the sentinels and outposts, wrapped in his military cloak. His dress was in no way superior to that of his comrades; what did make him conspicuous were his arms and horses. Hannibal was by far the foremost both of the cavalry and the infantry, the first to enter the fight and the last to leave the field. But these great merits were matched by great vices-inhuman cruelty, a perfidy worse than Punic, an utter absence of truthfulness, reverence, fear of the gods, respect for oaths, sense of religion. Characterized by this compound of virtues and vices, for three years he served under Hasdrubal, and during the whole time he never lost an opportunity of gaining by practice or observation the experience necessary for one who was to be a great leader of men’.

As we will see later, when reflecting on Hannibal in Silius Italicus, his sacrificing rest to the advantage of military commitments and thoughts related to them, is an important element in the representation of the dux. More generally, the character is drawn as exceptional, as someone who challenges biological laws and normality.

In other passages, Hannibal is described as a sower of discord (Liv. Hist. 21, 6, 2 *litis ... sator*), habitual architect of fraud and tricks (Liv. Hist. 21, 34, 1-2 *suis artibus, fraude et insidiis*), astute strategist (Liv. Hist. 22, 3, 3 «*consulis deinde consilia atque animum et situm regionum itineraque et copias ad com meatus expediendos et cetera quae cognosse in rem erat summa omnia cum cura inquirendo exsequebatur*»), provocateur in war (Liv. Hist. 22, 13, 1 «*inritat etiam de industria Romanum ducem*»), constantly devoted to war (for reasons of space, I am not quoting the many passages).

What happens, instead, with the depiction of Hannibal in the longest epic poem of Latinity that has survived, the *Punica* by Silius Italicus, for which Livy is – as many scholars remind us and have written – one of the most important models and intertexts³?

Some traits of Hannibal in Silius seem to echo Livy’s depiction; others depart from that model. Those exceptional characteristics, which we have already highlighted and which make Hannibal a leader and a hero, are also present in Silius; however, differently from Livy, Silius adopts an emotional and pathetic register in the portrait of the character (Sil. 1, 56-69)⁴:

*Ingenio motus avidus fideique sinister
is fuit, exsuperans astu, sed devius aequi.
Armato nullus diuum pudor, improba virtus
et pacis despectus honos; penitusque medullis
sanguinis humani flagrat sitis. his super aevi
flore virens Aegates abolere, parentum
dedecus, ac Siculo demergere foedera ponto.
Dat mentem Iuno ac laudum spe corda fatigat.
Iamque aut nocturno penetrat Capitolia visu
aut rapidis fertur per summas passibus Alpes.
Saepe etiam famuli turbato ad limina somno*

³There is a vast secondary bibliography on this topic: v. Nesselrath, 1986; Pomeroy, 2010; Steele, 1922.

⁴All the passages cited from the first book have been commented on by Feeney, 1982.

*expavere truce[m] per vasta silentia vocem
ac largo sudore virum invenere futuras
miscentem pugnas et inania bella gerentem*

'By nature, he was eager for action and faithless to his plighted word, a past master in cunning, but a strayer from justice. Once armed he had no respect for Heaven, he was brave for evil and despised the glory of peace, and a thirst for human blood burned in his inmost heart. Besides all this, his youthful vigor, longed to blot out the Aegates, the shame of the fathers, and to drown the treaty of peace in the Sicilian sea. Juno inspired him and tormented his spirit with ambition. Already, in visions of the night, he either stormed the Capitol, or marched at speed over the summits of the Alps. Often too the servants who slept at his door were roused and terrified by a fierce cry that broke the desolate silence, and found their master dripping with sweat, while he fought battles still to come and waged imaginary warfare'⁵.

It is clear, in this portrait⁶, that Hannibal has exceptional characteristics, but at the same time he is also wicked and ruthless, as N. Bernstein⁷ and M. A. Vinchesi⁸ also point out:

«In Silius the character is agitated by dark forces – anger, fury, hatred – and his wickedness has a demonic and superhuman aspect to it. Insatiable with blood and glory, he does not fear any obstacle of nature and not even the gods, whom he indeed challenges with an act of sacrilegious and titanic pride. These exceptional negative qualities already emerge in the dense portrait that opens the actual story, after the long proem and the appearance of Juno [I, 56 sgg.]».

As in subsequent passages, Silius connects sleep, insomnia and dreams to war, painting his characters (and very often Hannibal) as busy, even at night, meditating or dreaming about military affairs, rather than relying on a rest that could also be a stasis compared to daytime commitments⁹. In Silius, the traditional characterization of sleep as a natural break from worries is purely tangential. Seen as space of vulnerability for those who sleep, sleep itself is only rarely personified; it is linked to magic, sometimes to death and to wonders (but less than in Statius).

Silius's dream poetics¹⁰ above all, is characterized by epiphanic dreams, as it happened in Virgil; these dreams therefore connect, in spaces of transit and intersection, the human world with the divine world or that of the diurnal reality.

Insomnia acquires, in *Punica*, a crucial role. Insomniacs are mainly the duces and the soldiers, engaged at night in war activities or in thoughts related to the war. Insomnia as a value is also theorized by the omniscient narrator or by intradiegetic characters (Sil. 3, 172-3 et al.). The reference to responsibilities, which hinders sleep and stands as axiologically preferable to inertia, has its psychoanalytic roots in what Freud called "super-ego", but also in the disturbances and rumination of the characters' soul. Sometimes, as in Statius, sleep and insomnia affect the natural world. In conclusion, it is a space of crucial importance and considerable variety, with characteristics of adherence to tradition but also of lively originality.

⁵All the translations of passages from Silius are my own.

⁶For a general bibliography see Sacerdoti, 2016, pp. 46-57.

⁷Bernstein, 2010, on this aspect pp. 379-380.

⁸Vinchesi, 2001, p. 41

⁹See Sacerdoti, 2019.

¹⁰On dream in antiquity see Freud, 1996⁹, pp. 9-14.

We now come to the characterization of Hannibal, the real focus of this study. As it is known, Hannibal is characterized by «desire for glory, his boundless hatred for Rome, and his vow to conquer the Romans»¹¹ all traits that «are reinforced by his powerful alliance with the divine instigator of war herself, Juno, whose personal grievances against the Aeneadae are allied to a partiality for Carthage, where the goddess was still worshipped as Juno Lacinia. Although Hannibal loses no opportunity to align himself with the very paradigm of heroism, Hercules, he seems to compete with rather than to emulate the god and his cultic relationship is distorted»¹²

The first adjective with which Hannibal is described in the poem is «belliger»¹³ (Sil. 1, 38). It is a lexeme widely exploited in the Latin poetry of the imperial age of which Silius is part: tragic Seneca uses it to describe Mars (par excellence) in Sen. Phaedr. 188 and 808; Statius uses it a lot (Stat. Theb. 7, 383; 10, 739; 12, 546; Stat. Silv. 3, 2, 117; 4, 3, 159; 4, 4, 72; 5, 2, 33; 1, 1, 30 et al.), as Silius does (Sil. 1, 38; 6, 586; 7, 292; 15, 4; 3, 398; 10, 314; 12, 748; 15, 594; 17, 300; 17, 490; 1, 434; 10, 249; 13, 362; 16, 65; 3, 124; 4, 471; 2, 168; 8, 260; 13, 532; 4, 163; 14, 326; 17, 531; 3, 162; 11, 564). Let us not dwell on the obvious reference to the war, of which bellicosity is a distinctive feature, and let us focus on the second epithet referred to Hannibal, «sanguineus» (Sil. 1, 40).

The adjective was already very common in Virgil (Verg. Aen. 12, 332), and is, in Latin poetry, used almost exclusively (excluding late antiquity) in the Flavian epic (V. Fl. 3, 588; 5, 307; Stat. Theb. 2, 461; 5, 5; 7, 408; 10, 479; Sil. 4, 517; 10, 319; 14, 486; 14, 556 et al.). The truculent character of the adjective refers to the sphere of craving for blood and death, and falls within a more generic tendency towards the extremes of this literary vein. In the passage from which we started, Hannibal is characterized as the only bulwark against destiny (Sil. 1, 38-41): “*iamque deae cunctas sibi belliger induit iras / Hannibal (hunc audet solum componere fatis), / sanguineo cum laeta viro atque in regna Latini / turbine mox saevo venientum haud inscia cladum (...)*”

- ‘Now warlike Hannibal clothed himself with all the wrath of the goddess (his single arm she dared to match against destiny), when, rejoicing in that man of blood, and aware of the fierce storm of disasters in store for the realm of Latinus (...)’.

Hannibal's exceptional character stands out in all its grandeur and his sinister aura, as denounced by the condition of singularity of the leader («solum», v. 39), and as is already anticipated by the nexus «dux ... unus» (Sil. 1, 36).

In the sanctuary of Carthage, consecrated to Elissa's dead (Sil. 1, 101-103), Hannibal as a child does not pale in front of the many mirabilia (the priestess who cries in delirium, atrocious rites, the blood on the threshold, the flames), thus proving to have an intrepid temperament (animos, Sil. 1, 105). Therefore, in nuce, the character traits of the adult are revealed in their quintessence. The father's warning is loud and clear (Sil. 1, 107-113):

*“(...)si fata negarint
dedecus id patriae nostra depellere dextra,
haec tua sit laus, nate, velis. Age, concipe bella
latura exitium Laurentibus. Horreat ortus
iam pubes Tyrrhena tuos, partusque recusent
te surgente, puer, Latiae producere matres”*

‘If fate does not permit my right hand to avert this dishonor from our land, you, my son, must choose this as your field of fame. Be quick to swear a war that shall bring destruction to the Laurentines. Let the Tuscan youth already dread your birth and the let Latian mothers, as they see you grow, refuse to rear their offspring’.

¹¹Littlewood, 2010, p. LXXI.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³See Sacerdoti, 2017.

In the words of his father, Hannibal is entrusted with the task of conceiving lethal wars and instilling terror (even at an atavistic level), as well as horror, in his enemies.

Hannibal is painted as the glory of Libya and unsurpassed in as a soldier (Sil. 11, 603).

The couplet in Sil. 1, 70-71 introduces the origins of Hannibal's hatred for Italy: "*Hanc rabiem in fines Italum, Saturniaque arva / addiderat quondam puero patrius furor*".

- 'When he was a mere child, his father's passion had kindled in Hannibal this frenzy against Italy and the country of Saturn'.

The words chosen by Silius are clear: rabies and furor, highly pathetic and intense terms, which refer to an overcoming of the limit in a negative and (as per the first) aggressive direction.

In reference to narrative strategies, in a valuable article, Matier¹⁴ recalls how many critics believe that the Punica do not have a real protagonist, while he believes that "Hannibal, in spite of his faults, is the only figure in the poem who has any real life and that he qualifies for the role of hero" (ibid., p. 4), as also David Vessey had already pointed out¹⁵.

Tipping¹⁶, in his beautiful monograph entitled Exemplary epic. Silius Italicus' Punica, devotes a whole chapter to the figure of Hannibal (pp. 51-106), where he reminds us how Hannibal was, for generations and generations of Romans, the enemy par excellence, and how, in ancient literatures, the lack of Carthaginian reliability was perceived in an almost proverbial way. Very detailed is the description of Hannibal's vices and virtues, not only in Livy, but also in Valerius Maximus (ibid. pp. 53-54): lusty, cruel, hated, proud, reckless, Hannibal in Valerius Maximus is nevertheless confident in his abilities, human and generous, vulnerable when confronting the ingratitude of others.

Cicero often compares Fabius and Hannibal; Horace calls Hannibal "dirus" (ibid., pp. 54-55). Livy also talks about the positive aspects of the character: there are examples of honesty, exceptional fighting skills, even cases of piety and "pietas" (ibid., p. 57).

In Silius Italicus, Hannibal is the relentless enemy of the Romans and a demonic example of non-Romanity (ibid., p. 61), of tyranny (ibid., p. 66), angry and intolerant (ibid., p. 67). However, Hannibal is also endowed with "pietas" and loyalty (Sil. 13, 744-50), he is able to keep his men united (ibid., p. 75); his military qualities are similar to those of the Romans (ibid., p. 74). It is therefore clear that the character is complex and not unambiguous.

In the eleventh book, Capua asks too much of the Romans, who of course refuse; at this point Capua opens itself to the Carthaginians, who influence its lifestyle, and gives in to lust and inertia (vv. 28-36), with parties, banquets, civil disagreements, greed and ambition.

In the twelfth book Hannibal "(...) *ductor fessas luxu attritasque secundis / erigere et verbis temptabat sistere mentes*?" ('sought to lift up and steady the hearts enfeebled by luxury and enervated by prosperity', Sil. 12, 83-84) and "(...) *numerabat inertes / atque actos sine Marte dies ac stare pudebat*", 'was counting up all the idle days that had passed without battle, and was ashamed of inactivity' (Sil. 12, 104-105). The Carthaginians suffer a defeat, and (Sil. 12, 486-495)

(...) *arduus ipse*
Tifata insidit, propior qua moenibus instat
collis, et e tumulis subiectam despicit urbem.
Verum ubi tot sese circumfundentibus armis
vallatas socium portas unaque negari
intravisse sibi Capuaeque erumpere cernit,
Amius euentus nunc ferro frangere coetum
obstantum meditatur, init nunc avia coepto
consilia atque astu quaerit tot milia portis
abstrahere artatis cinctosque resolvere muros.

¹⁶Tipping 2010

‘Hannibal encamped aloft on Mount Tifata, on the height that rises close by the walls, and looked down thence upon the city below. But now, when he saw himself surrounded by so many armies, and the city of his allies blockaded, so that it was impossible either for him to enter, or for the Capuans to get out, he was troubled for the issue. At one time he thought of shattering every obstacle with the sword; or again he might swerve from his present purpose, and devise some stratagem to draw the great host away from the closed gates and set free the beleaguered city.’

Hannibal finally decides to lead the soldiers against Rome until Jupiter and Juno intervene and the Carthaginians withdraw. At this point, they return to Capua.

In conclusion, the character of Hannibal, in Silius, is in the foreground; since he was a child he was characterized by an intrepid courage, and as in Livy (who only briefly mentions this element, while Silius develops it widely) he renounces sleep to devote himself to *negotia* or – if he sleeps – he dreams of *negotia* themselves; this is the characteristic on which I reflected¹⁷ and which is not present in other studies on the subject. Constantly present throughout the poem, Silius’s Hannibal is a tragic, pathetic, and bloody figure.

¹⁷See Sacerdoti, 2019.

Bibliography

- Bernstein, N. (2010), Family and State in the Punica, in Augoustakis, A. (ed.), Brill's Companion to Silius Italicus, Brill, pp. 377-397.
- Feeney, D. (1982), A Commentary on Silius Italicus Book 1, Oxford University Press.
- Freud, S. (1996, ninth edition) L'interpretazione dei sogni, Newton.
- Littlewood, J. R (2010), A Commentary on Silius Italicus' Punica 7, Oxford.
- Matier, K. O. (1989), Hannibal: the real hero of the Punica?, in Acta classica 32, pp. 3-17.
- Nesselrath, H. G. (1986), Zu den Quellen des Silius Italicus, in Hermes, 114. Bd., H. 2, pp. 203-230.
- Pomeroy, A. (2010), To Silius through Livy and his Predecessors, in Augoustakis. A. (ed.), Brill's Companion to Silius Italicus, Brill, pp. 27-45.
- Sacerdoti, A. (2016), Distinguere lingua (Sil. 1, 78): sul primo canto dei Punica e la sua ricezione, in LAM 5, pp. 31-83.
- Sacerdoti, A. (2017), Di assedi, suicidi e lessemi: appunti a margine di guerre e città nei Punica di Silio, in Rotili, M., Pignatelli G. (edd.), Si vis pacem, para bellum. La memoria delle armi, Giannini, Napoli, pp. 131-136.
- Sacerdoti, A. (2019), Tremefacta quies. Spazi di transito nella Tebaide di Stazio e nei Punica di Silio Italico, Fedoa University Press.
- Steele, R. B. (1922), The Method of Silius Italicus, in Classical Philology, Vol. 17, N. 4, pp. 319-333.
- Vessey, D. (1982), Flavian epic, in The Cambridge History of Classical Literature, Cambridge University Press, vol. 2, 5, p. 86.