

## Silius Italicus: Why Seventeen Books?

The unusual length of Silius Italicus' *Punica* has often caused puzzlement. Antony Augoustakis discusses the point in the first chapter of the recent Brill companion to Silius. He credits Michael von Albrecht with noting that the number of books "corresponds to the number of years of the war".<sup>1</sup> Although Silius did not cover the war annalistically, that is certainly plausible, as far as it goes. However, I think we can go one step further.

It seems to me that the number seventeen would have had another significance for Silius, at least as important as the length of the Second Punic War. We know from the Younger Pliny's obituary (*Epistulae* 3.7) that Silius was a passionate admirer of Vergil, celebrating his birthday with more solemnity than his own, and venerating his portrait above all others, and his tomb as if it were a temple (3.7.8). I do not think it is coincidental that Vergil's canonical works – the single book of *Bucolica*, four books of *Georgics*, and twelve of the *Aeneid* – also add up to seventeen. Silius could not hope to compete with Vergil in quality, and wisely chose not to compete directly in subject, or variety of subjects, but he could at least write an equal number of books.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to imagine that Silius mixed twelve parts epic, four parts didactic, and one part pastoral to make his poetic stew. However, I'd have to sit down and read the epic with some care to find out, and I won't be doing that any time soon. I am fairly certain that the answer is no, and that didactic and pastoral elements are much smaller than that. Silius seems to have confined himself to putting Livian substance into Vergilian form, at Vergilian length.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. Augoustakis, *Brill's Companion to Silius Italicus* (Leiden, 2010), 8-10, quoting (9 n22) M. von Albrecht, *Silius Italicus. Freiheit und Gebundenheit römischer Epik* (Amsterdam, 1964), 133 n 35. The idea that the epic is unfinished, and that Silius intended to match Ennius' eighteen books, is now out of style (Augoustakis, *op. cit.*, 9).

<sup>2</sup> But not an equal number of lines. Lacunae and interpolations in both authors (some of each possibly quite large) make an exact count impossible. However, as transmitted, Silius' epic is something like 800 lines or 6% shorter than the three canonical works of Vergil taken together. I take it that Silius did not agree with Martial's apparent assumption (14.185) that Vergil wrote the *Culex*.

<sup>3</sup> Much more than Vergilian length, if we just compare *Punica* and *Aeneid*.