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Commentary on Silius Italicus, Punica 7

R. Joy Littlewood

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Once stigmatized as 'the worst epic ever written', Silius Italicus' *Punica* is now the focus of a resurgence of critical interest and wide-ranging positive reappraisal. In a climate of flourishing interest in Flavian literary culture, *Punica* 7 now joins the rising number of commentaries on Flavian epic. While offering an insightful analysis of Silius' complex intertextuality, Littlewood demonstrates how his republican theme bears the imprint of Rome's more recent experience of civil conflict and the military and civic ethos of the Flavians, and illuminates the poet's engagement with luxuria, exploring tensions within the literary and political culture of the Age of Domitian. The narrative of *Punica 7* is a tale of treachery and perseverance, of a battle of wills and the desecration of the Italian land, which is poetically interpreted through intertextual allusion to Virgil's Georgics. In the centre of the book Hannibal commits the anti-pastoral atrocity of igniting 2000 Roman ploughing oxen to simulate a nocturnal raid based on Homer's Doloneia. The burning flesh of this subverted sacrifice, interwoven with imagery evoking bacchanal madness and the rising smoke of the sack of Troy, sets the stage for a dramatic finale in which Rome's traditional virtues triumph over oriental guile and internal discord. This penetrating study explores how the historical narrative coalesces with mythology, the proto-history of Rome, and the genealogy of its protagonists.

Littlewood's volume is the first full English commentary on a book of Silius Italicus' *Punica* and is supported by an extended introduction covering Silius' life, his literary models, the characterization of his protagonists, Fabius and Hannibal, his epic style, and the transmission of the text.

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