

Commentary On Silius' *Punica* 14.590-608

After a brutal *naumachia* outside the harbour of Syracuse (14.353–579), the Roman forces are ready to take the walls and the city (14.580-1). Yet, at this moment ‘suddenly a monstrous plague and unfriendly disease, provided by the divine grudge and toils of the sea’ strikes (14.582-4 *ni subito importuna lues inimicaque pestis, invidia / divum pelagique labore parata*), and even spreads to the military camps (14.596-7 *tum serpere labes / Tartarea atque haustis popuari castra manipulis*). It is this plague, its arrival and effects on the humans and animals of Syracuse, that these lines are concerned with. Engagement with plague narratives was common throughout ancient literature, most famously Thucydides and his descriptions of the plague that ravaged Athens in 430 BC (Thuc. 2.49-55). Many Latin writers would later take Thucydides’ descriptions and adapt them for their poetry. It is these poets, principally Virgil, Lucretius and Ovid, that Silius is engaging with in these lines.

Silius’ begins by describing the effect on the environment, ‘the thick air of gloom smoked with mist’ (14.590 *fumabat crassus nebulis caliginis aër*), ‘gloomy vapour’ so thick the sky was ‘pitch-black’ (14.593 *ater picea vapor expirabat in aethra*), and the land was so corrupted by heat, it produced no food (14.591-2 *squalebat tellus, vitiato fervida dorso, nec victum dabat*). Such vivid descriptions of a plague’s supposed environmental effects may seem strange to a modern reader, but are fully consistent with both Lucretius’ Epicurean thought, and the divine retribution given as a cause of the plague by Silius (C.F. 14.582-4 and 596-7).

Lucretius believed that diseases started in the air when the right ‘seeds’ came together by chance, throwing ‘the heavens into turmoil’, and the air would become diseased (*Lucr. De Rerum.* 6.1096-97 *ea cum casu sunt forte coorta / et perturbarunt caelum, fit morbidus aer*). Clouds and mists coming down from the sky are specifically blamed for carrying down disease (6.1099-100 *aut extrinsecus, ut nubes nebulaeque, superne / per caelum veniunt*), albeit with less vivid and dramatic language than Silius uses. It does seem plausible that a Roman audience would accept these ideas about the environmental origins of plagues, whether they believed in a divine cause behind the disease or in Epicurean ideas of chance. Although the skies most probably didn’t turn

black, it is not hard to understand why Silius would echo writers like Ovid (see below), and use vivid, dark imagery to portray these events. Thucydides, later echoed by Lucretius, wrote about people giving up, and putting up little resistance once they knew they had the disease (Thuc. 2.49-55 GET EXACT QUOTE). The heat and its affect on the body was also a key symptom, described by all writers, including Silius (see below). Plus, in both Thucydides and the *Punica*, this is all happening in the midst of war. In that context, that ancient people would see this unknown, unexplainable disease as filling the sky with darkness, is understandable.

Ovid's treatment of a plague in heroic age Aegina (*Ovid. Met.* 7. 523-613) uses similar imagery to describe the plague's origins. The plague came from the heavens, covered the land in darkness and brought heat with it (7. 528-29 *principio caelum spissa caligine terras / pressit et ignavos inclusit nubibus aestus*). Ovid is sees no issue with both blaming Juno's wrath (7.528-29 *dira lues ira populis lunonis iniquae / incidit exosae dictas a paelice terras*), and the air that carried the pestilence down to the land (7.532 *letiferis calidi spirarunt aestibus austr*). Thus we see Silius uses ideas from multiple writers in his plague descriptions, and he continues to do so for the rest of this passage. Bruere has convincingly argued that Ovid is Silius' main influence (Bruere, 1959, p.259), and these lines and plague descriptions demonstrate this well. He does not simply copy other writers, but takes what they have written and uses his own vivid and horrific expressions, often substituting words with cognates (Bruere, 1959, p.259) to create his own concise version of the plague narrative.

Word Count: 675

- 594-96, The effects on the animals, C.F., Lucretius and Ovid both mention dogs first, and describe the effects on birds. Silius is more concise.
- 598 - 605, Plague symptoms, C.F. Lucretius, Virgil and Ovid. Lots of similarities, but in many ways Silius is more concise, takes all of the previous tropes/descriptions, and condenses them, without diminishing the horror.
- 606-8, the waste of life for no good reason, compare with Silius' overall message of the civil war, C.F. Lucretius and Ovid, the affects on burial.

Bibliography

Augoustakis, Antony (ed), (2010) *Brill's Companion to Silius Italicus*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV

Bruere, Richard T. (1959) 'Color Ovidianus in Silius Punica 8-17', in *Classical Philology*, Vol. 54, 4 Oct., pp. 228-245

Gardner, Hunter H. (2019) *Pestilence and the Body Politic in Latin Literature*. Oxford: Oxford Academic

Matier, K. O., (1988) 'Prejudice and the Punica again. Silius Italicus and his critics', in *Journal for the Classics in South Africa*, Vol. 33, pp. 14-21

Wezel, Ernst (1873) *De C. Silii Italici cum fontibus tum exemplis*, Limbacensis Saxo: Lipsiae