

TWO GREEK NAMES IN SILIUS ITALICUS' *PUNICA*

Harpe

In Silius' *Punica* 2, the Amazon Asbyte, one of Hannibal's allies, emerges as a prominent figure in the siege of Saguntum. Silius' exploitation of Greek etymologies becomes clear in this episode, when we consider for instance that Asbyte's murderer is called Theron, a portentous name, associated with hunting (θηράω) and beasts (θηρ).¹ What has not heretofore been noticed by critics is that Silius emphasizes the Greek name of one of Asbyte's associates. If we take a closer look at Harpe's name,² we recognize that a pun is intended by the poet; her name, with its Greek origin in the verb ἀρπάζω, prefigures Harpe's role in seizing death away from Asbyte herself:

1) Cf. F. Spaltenstein, *Commentaire des Punica de Silius Italicus* (livres 1 à 8), Genève 1986, 122–123.

2) The name Harpe is also given to another woman warrior in Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* 6,375. The substantive *harpe* (sickle) is also widely used in Ovid, Lucan, and Valerius Flaccus (cf. OLD s. v. 1).

*namque ut fatiferos conuerti prospicit arcus,
opposito procul insidiis Nasamonias Harpe
corpore praeripuit letum calamumque uolantem,
dum clamat, patulo excipiens tramisit hiatu,
et primae ferrum a tergo uidere sorores.* (2,116–120)

The Greek verb ἀρπάζω alludes to its Latin equivalent *rapio*, which in this case appears in its compound form *praeripuit* (2,118). As Harpe tries to protect Asbyrte, her name as well as her body are suggestive of her efforts (*corpore praeripuit*). Harpe's role is of importance for this episode, especially since Silius emphasizes her presence by putting her name at the end of the hexameter (2,117) and by placing almost in the beginning of the following verse the Latin verb, an expression equivalent to Harpe's Greek name (*prae-ripuit*) and accompanied by the word that describes her doom (*letum*).³ Thus, Harpe becomes a substitute victim that is used to delay but not avert the queen's death.

Lake Trasimene

In Punica 5, in a digression exemplary of the poet's wide interests in geography, topography, and genealogy,⁴ Silius traces the origins of the name of lake Trasimene. Thrasymennus was once a young boy in Etruria, seduced by a nymph and kidnapped by her into the river (5,7–23). The story of Thrasymennus and of the nymph Agylle, however reminiscent of similar myths about Hylas, Ilia, Salmacis among others, has a peculiarity in Silius: the abduction of the young boy symbolizes implicitly a sort of punishment for his father's arrogance. Tyrrhenus, Thrasymennus' father, the inventor of the *tuba* (5,12–13), is hybridically immoderate:

nec modicus uoti natum ad maiora fouebat. (5,14)

Tyrrhenus' high aspirations are cut short by the incident at the site of the lake and the abduction of his son. Thrasymennus' name originates in the Greek θάρρος/θάρσος and its cognate adjective θρασύς (designating courage, incontinence or rashness) and alludes to Silius' explanation of Tyrrhenus' arrogant and immodest character as reflected in his hopes for Thrasymennus.⁵

Furthermore, it is interesting to see the relation between the ending of Book 4 and the opening of Book 5. At the end of the fourth book (763 ff.), on the eve of the battle at the lake Trasimene, Hannibal urges his fellow-citizens in Carthage not to proceed with the custom of child sacrifice (his own son would be sacrificed to fulfill ancestral traditions). By deferring the custom to a future date, the Carthaginian general promises instead that the upcoming total defeat of the Roman army at

3) J. O'Hara (True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay, Michigan 1996, 88) discusses an interesting parallel in Aen. 3,226–227 (*Harpyiae . . . diripiunt*).

4) J. Nicol (The Historical and Geographical Sources Used by Silius Italicus, Oxford 1936) discusses other aetiological episodes but not this one.

5) It is not uncommon for sons to be named after their fathers' characteristics (e.g. Telemachus).

Trasimene will compensate for the aborted sacrifice (*ast ego te, Thrasymenne, uago cum milite praeceps / lustrabo et superis quaeram libamina belli*, 4,825–826), while his son will eventually continue the war against the Romans (*at puer armorum et belli seruabitur heres*, 4,814). Silius' aetiological myth on the origin of the name Trasimene, at the opening of Book 5, however, reflects back on the previous scene of the sacrifice deferred. Both Hannibal and Tyrrhenus are immodest in their wishes: Hannibal will be defeated at the end of the war and his son never becomes his successor, contrary to the father's expectations. Likewise Thrasymennus' abduction by the nymph results in the permanent separation of father and son and the annihilation of Tyrrhenus' hopes.