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IRANIAN THEMES IN THE POETRY OF STATIUS

ABSTRACT: Publius Papinius Statius was one of the most important poets of the Flavian Age. His works (*Thebais*, *Silvae* and unfinished *Achilleis*) became the object of great interest of scholars. One of the issues of Statian poetry that was so far ignored by scholars was its image of the East and Easterners. Among them the Iranian world (first of all Parthian empire) is the one that deserves special interest because of the importance of relations between Rome and Parthia as well as the old literary tradition concerning Persia, Parthia etc. Although this matter is of marginal importance in Statius, there are a lot of references to Iranian themes in *Thebais* and *Silvae*. Some of them are connected with military and political relations with Rome (esp. the Armenian War in the times of Nero), while some refer to ethnographic tradition and traditional image of Achaemenid Persia. In these passages we can find great influence of Augustan poets, Horace in particular.

KEY WORDS: Statius, Romano-Parthian relations, Flavian poetry, Iran in Latin poetry

In the last decades, the work of Publius Papinius Statius encompassing two mythological epics, the *Thebaid* and the unfinished *Achilleis* and the collection of occasional poetry *Silvae*, has become the object of greater interest of scholars. They have been able to discern originality in Statian poems and the poet himself is no longer considered a mannerist epigone of Augustan poetry. Along with a *sui generis* rehabilitation of the emperor Domitian, Statius' laudatory verses, praising the sovereign, have

begun to be seen in a different light. The new issue that has been brought into focus was the ambiguity of these laudatory passages, the rhetorical sophistication of the poems and the play with the earlier literary tradition. In the secondary sources that I was able to access, I did not find any, even superficial, analysis of references to the Iranian world in the poetry of Statius. Yet the occurrence of those references (even the slightest ones) could to some degree help us to understand his literary work. The aim of the paper is the investigation the references to Iranian themes that can be found in the *Thebaid* and the *Silvae*, followed by an analysis of their context, pointing out the influence of earlier poets (particularly Horace) on the way Statius includes references to the Persian and Parthian empires in his poems.¹

The literary activity of Statius coincided with the reign of Domitian (81–96 AD). During that time Rome and Parthia enjoyed good and peaceful relations as it were for the most of the first century of the empire. Nonetheless earlier relations between those two powers had had influence on the references to Iranian themes in the *Thebaid* and the *Silvae*, and thus it is worth outlining briefly the course of the Roman-Parthian relations in the 1st century AD.

When in 20 BC the emperor Augustus had concluded a treaty with the Parthian king Phraates IV, the age of peace between two empires began. The tensions, particularly serious at the end of Tiberius' reign in 37 AD, were staved off by diplomatic means, only during the reign of Nero the Romans and Parthians came into conflict in Armenia. As a result of this war Armenia became part of the Parthian sphere of influence. Under the terms of the treaty of Rhandaia (63 AD) the king of Armenia was to be crowned by the Roman emperor but it was Tigranes from the Arsacid dynasty who came to the throne. Rome was weakened by the civil war that broke out after Nero's death in 68 AD but the Parthian king Vologaeses I did not opt to attack the Romans. He did even propose military aid to Vespasian, one of the claimants to the Roman throne. However, Vespasian did not want to accept it, since his armies achieved a decisive victory in the war against Vitellius. Having taken

¹ New approach to Domitian, different from the older one, based on the hostile senatorial tradition, can be seen in the works of: Jones 2002; Griffin 2008: 54–83. Assessment of the poetry of Statius against the background of the Flavian Age: Bardon 1962; Newlands 2004: 1–45; Zeiner 2005: 1–11; Dominik 2016.

power, the new emperor reorganized the Roman provinces in Asia Minor and annexed the client kingdoms of Armenia Minor and Commagene. Thanks to this policy the Roman Empire was considerably strengthened in the border area with Parthia. Thus the negative consequences of the treaty of Rhandaia were minimized, without breaking it. Not only did the Romans strengthen their position on the Euphrates, they encircled Armenia from the north as well thanks to military activity in the Caucasus region. In 75 AD, it was Vologaeses who asked Vespasian for help, when Armenia and Media Atropatene were attacked by Alans, but his appeal met with refusal. In the years that followed, Vespasian's successors Titus and Domitian and the Parthian king Pacorus II, who had won the civil war after the death of Vologaeses I, did not reverse the policy of their predecessors. In spite of some tensions and attempts to reinforce the border region, peace prevailed in Roman-Parthian relations. Domitian was busy with the wars on the Rhine and Danube frontiers, whereas the eastern *limes* remained peaceful. It was the Romans who crossed the Euphrates and broke the treaty with Parthia under Trajan, seventeen years after Domitian's death. This aggressive campaign waged by Trajan was a break from what was up until then consistent politics of the emperors towards the empire of Arsacids and it weighed heavily on Roman-Parthian relations in the next two centuries.²

The *Thebaid*, which is the earliest surviving work of Statius, was written in 80–92 AD and includes few Iranian references, chiefly due to its mythological content. The case of the *Silvae*, written in the last years of Statius' life, is different because of its occasional character. Statius was given a chance of employing many *topoi* connected with the civilization of Iran. For the sake of chronology the references to Iranian issues included in the *Thebaid* will be presented first and those from the *Silvae* will be analysed later on.

Iranian religion was a relatively rare topic in Roman poetry. Mazdaism in its diversity was indeed fairly well known and referred to by Greeks, but the Romans did not do it frequently.³ However, in the hymn

² On the Roman-Parthian relations in the 1st century AD, see: Debevoise 1938: 153–215; Grosso 1954; Dąbrowa 1981; Dąbrowa 1983; Campbell 2002; Jones 2002: 155–159; Lerouge 2007: 129–149; Kozłowski 2012; Olbrycht 2013.

³ The most thorough study of this problem is the book by A. de Jong (1997), but this scholar focuses first and foremost on Greek literature, especially the longest pas-

to Apollo making up the last verses of Book I of the *Thebaid*, Statius makes reference to the Iranian world:

*Adsis, o memor hospitii, Iunoniaque arva
Dexter ames, seu te roseum Titana vocari
Gentis Achaemeniae ritu, seu praestat Osirin
Frugiferum, seu Persei sub rupibus antri
Indignata sequi torquentem cornua Mithram* (ll. 716–720).

The poet speaks to Apollo in a manner that was popular in the literary tradition of Greece and Rome when addressing a deity, i.e. by enumerating his various names. Referring to Apollo as a *roseus Titan* (l. 717), allegedly in line with an ‘Achaemenian’⁴ custom, is rather enigmatic: although identification of Apollo as a solar Titan (i.e. Helios) is clear, the connection with the adjective *roseus* does not have a parallel in Latin poetry. Identifying Apollo with Mithra is more understandable, since both deities shared their solar features. Thus, Statius is one of the first Roman authors mentioning Mithra. H. Sonnabend is right when he writes that this deity was not considered part of the Parthian pantheon although the Greeks had been aware of its presence in Iranian religion for a few centuries. The mention of the rock of Perseus (*Persei* [...] *antri*, l. 719) indicates Statius’ familiarity with the myth according to which this Greek hero was an eponymic ancestor of Persians. Essentially, in the context of the whole hymn these verses can be treated as evidence that Apollo’s cult was ubiquitous and that he had the whole world, both Greek and barbarian lands, under his protection.⁵

sages on Iranian religion. Some brief references to this issue (but not those from Stavian poetry) are analysed in: Lerouge 2007: 323–339.

⁴ Roman poets used the names *Medae*, *Persae* and *Parthae* (and the adjectives derived from them) interchangeably. The epithet *Achaemenius* was synonymous with these adjectives as well. Statius uses it three times in his poetry in this very meaning. Cf. *Achaemeniumque costum* (Hor. *Carm.* III 1, 44); *Non tot Achaemeniis arman-tur Erythra sagittis* (Prop. II 13, 1); *Urbs in Achaemeniis vallibus ista fuit* (Ov. *Ars* I 226); *Achaemeniis decurrant Medica Susis / Agmina* (Luc. II 47–48); *Achaemenio regi* (Claud. *Rapt.* III 264). Different (and not very coherent) ways of calling the Iranian peoples in Roman poetry, see: Hardie 2007: 140; Babnis 2016: 172.

⁵ Sonnabend 1986: 295–299. The character of Perseus, who in the Greek tradition linked genealogies of different peoples, see: Gruen 2011: 253–265.

One of the Iranian peoples appearing in Roman poetry besides the Persians, the Medes and the Parthians were the Hyrcanians who inhabited the southern and eastern coast of the Caspian Sea (the modern Iranian provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran). Statius refers to them in Book VII of the *Thebaid*, where Jocasta contrasts the Hyrcanians and the Odrysii from Thracia with the Argives, who were reluctant to make peace with the Thebans: *Ab Hyrcanis hoc Odrysiisve tulissem / Regibus* (*Theb.* VII 524–525). It was rather the rulers of those two barbarian peoples who would be likely to comply with her requests than the leaders from Argos. It is a paradox that the Greeks are more cruel than barbarians but the emphasis put on this very fact is the main reason for the mention of the Odrysii. The reference to Hyrcanians does not serve the purpose so well, since they were less famous for their savageness and cruelty. It seems probable that Statius mentions them because of their active participation in the Parthian internal conflicts of the 1st century AD. Firstly, it was Hyrcania where Artaban II fled, when forced into exile by his rival Vonones, and where he gathered an army to continue his struggle for the Parthian throne. Then, in the 50s AD, Hyrcanians staged a rebellion against the king Vologaeses I. Searching for an ally they tried to contact the Roman commander in Armenia Corbulo and sent him envoys with the proposition of a military collaboration but no joint action came into effect.⁶

In Book XII of the *Thebaid* Statius introduces the character of the Athenian ruler Theseus into the Theban myth. Theseus was convinced by the Argive women to attack Creon, now the ruler of Thebes, so as to force him to bury the killed warriors of the Seven. In the enumeration of Attic towns which sent their armies against Thebans (ll. 611–634)

⁶ Hyrcanians and Hyrcania are not often mentioned in the poetry of the Ciceronian and Augustan Ages (*Sive in Hyrcanos Arabasve molles* – Catul. 11, 5; *bellum / Hyrcanis Arabisve parant* – Verg. *Aen.* VII 604–605; *Et petere Hyrcani litora nota maris* – Prop. II 30, 20), but later authors, particularly Flavian epic poets, do it more frequently (*Includit gelido vastisque Hyrcania silvis* – Luc. III 268; *Vidit ab Hyrcanis, Indoque ab litore silvis* – Luc. VIII 343; *Sive Hyrcani celant saltus* – Sen. *Phaed.* 70; *sub aeterna nive / Hyrcana tellus* – Sen. *Thy.* 631; *Barbaricas iam movit opes Hyrcanaque signa* – Val. Fl. III 494; *Quin et ab Hyrcanis Titanius expulit antris* – Val. Fl. V 79; *ceu tigride cerua / Hyrcana cum pressa tremit* – Sil. V 280–281; *Regia cum lucem posuerunt membra, probatum est / Hyrcanis adhibere canes* – Sil. XIII 473–474).

Stattius mentions the town of Marathon (*Et nondum Eoo clarum Marathon triumpho*, l. 617). He makes an *ex eventu* reference to the Greek victory over the Persians during the invasion of Datis in 490 BC and thus connects the mythical and historical world. This is the only mention of the Persian Wars in Statian poetry and it should be regarded as a mere ornament. Contrary to Augustan poets, Statius does not employ the motif of a link between Rome and Classical Greece, according to which it was the Romans who carried on the struggle began in the fields of Marathon, i.e. the defence of the Mediterranean world against the oriental despotism epitomised originally by the Achaemenid Empire and in the 1st century AD by the Parthians.⁷

In Book VIII of the *Thebaid* Statius depicts the scene of Thiodamas' appointment as a new Argive seer. Thiodamas was chosen to replace Amphiaraus, who had been swallowed by the earth. However, he dithered and was not convinced if he was really worthy of such a responsible function. His uncertainty is shown by Statius by means of a lengthy simile referring to the Iranian world:

*Sicut Achaemenius solium gentesque paternas
 Exceptit si forte puer, cui vivere patrem
 Tutius, incerta formidine gaudia librat,
 An fidi proceres, ne pugnet volgus habenis,
 Cui latus Euphratae, cui Caspia limina mandet,
 Sumere tunc arcus ipsumque onerare veretur
 Patris equum, visusque sibi nec scepra capaci
 Sustentare manu nec adhuc implere tiaran* (ll. 286–293).

Thiodamas is likened to a young heir to the Persian throne who after his father's death must take on many difficulties and anxieties. The adjective *Achaemenius* (l. 286) should be read as a synonym to *Parthicus*. The simile as a whole suits very well the realities of the Parthian Empire. What deserves special attention here is Statius' familiarity with the problem of succession in the house of Arsacid and the decentralisation

⁷ On the motif of the Persian Wars in the literature and propaganda of the Imperial Age, see: Hardie 2007; Spawforth 2012. See also Gruen 2011: 9–52 (the Classical Greek tradition concerning this conflict).

of their kingdom (governors and local rulers enjoyed considerable independence and often rose in revolt).⁸ The fidelity of aristocracy to the king was a key element in the policy of the Arsacids and had a great influence on their success or failure in foreign policy. Having taken into consideration Statius' considerable knowledge of Parthian issues, it can be assumed that the mention of a bow (l. 291) is not – as it usually happens in Latin poetry – a reference to the Parthian way of fighting but rather to the connection of this very weapon with the idea of kingship in ancient Iran. Passing on the bow was tantamount to appointing someone an heir. Besides the bow the second symbol of kingship mentioned by Statius is the tiara (l. 293), i.e. traditional Iranian royal headgear, mentioned frequently by the Classical Greek authors but usually ignored by the Roman poets.⁹ The whole passage confirms Statius' familiarity with the realities of the Parthian state. The fact that this simile, although somewhat anachronistic, is included in the mythological epic seems to be a fairly original way of transgressing the rules of the construction of the traditional epic world.¹⁰

The reference to the Iranian world we come across in Book VI of the *Thebaid* is definitely more typical and in line with the Latin literary tradition. In this book Statius provides a description of funeral games in

⁸ Local rebellions and usurpations weakened the Parthian Empire and prevented the Arsacids from pursuing a consistent policy (both internal and foreign). See e.g. Olbrycht 2013: 13–21. A. S. Hollis (1994: 207–208) holds a view that in these verses Statius alludes to contemporary changes on the Parthian throne. According to this scholar the *puer* mentioned in the *Thebaid* is actually Pacorus II (78–105).

⁹ However, the tiara is mentioned by the poets of late antiquity, Claudian and Sidonius, who were imitators of Statian poetry. Cf. *Cyrique tiara* (Claud. *In Ruf.* I 198); *Barbarus Arsacio consurgeret ore tiaras* (Claud. *IV Hon.* 216); *Hac quondam videre domo positoque tiaram* (Claud. *VI Hon.* 71); *Flectit Achaemenius lunatam Persa tiaram* (Sid. *Carm.* II 51); *Restituit mea signa Sapor positoque tiara* (Sid. *Carm.* VII 99); *Lunatam tibi flecteret tiaram* (Sid. *Carm.* XXIII 254). Their mentions of tiara deserve particular attention, because in the 3rd century AD the Sasanians resigned from using the Parthian tiara and chose a different type of crown. On the tiara, see: Olbrycht 1997.

¹⁰ Hollis 1994. On the anachronisms in Statian battle scenes, see: Gibson 2008: 103–107. The image of the Parthians from the point of view of their military customs (in particular the use of the bow) is described by Lerouge 2007: 273–321; Traina 2010: 66–71.

honour of Opheltes-Archemorus which were to initiate the famous Nemean Games. The participants of the race are likened to arrows:

*volucres isdem modo tardius arvis
Isse videntur equi; credas e plebe Cydonum
Parthorumque fuga totidem exiluisse sagittas* (ll. 595–597).

Here, Statius, on the one hand, complies with the requirements of traditional epic with their penchant for complex similes, and on the other hand, refers to the association of the Parthians and the Cydonians (i.e. Cretans) with archery. The mention of these two peoples seems to be an echo of the Virgilian phrase *libet Partho torquere Cydonia cornu / Spicula* (Verg. *Ecl.* X 59–60). The Parthians are once more connected with archery, which confirms the strength of the association in Roman poetry. Furthermore, Statius shows in these verses how skilfully he can make use of Iranian themes in mythological epic so as to leaven elaborate Homeric similes.¹¹

The first references to Iranian themes in the *Silvae* to be analysed are two passages of the so-called descriptive *Silvae*, which Statius devoted to the splendid *villae* of his friends and protectors. It was Statius who gave a literary ‘autonomy’ to the ecphrasis and who made it – as the first Latin author – the main topic of a poem instead of treating it only as a mere ornament.¹² It is easily noticeable in *Silvae* I 3 and II 2, where Statius uses nearly identical poetic images. In both poems the author focuses on the description of two wonderful estates, the *villa* of Manilius Vopiscus in Tibur and the *villa* of Pollius Felix in Surrentum. By dint of

¹¹ On sports games in Book VI of the *Thebaid*, see: Lovatt 2005. It is worth noting that in his epic work Statius often employs the comparisons to Hyrcanian lions or tigers: cf. *Hyrcaenae [...]* *iugales* (*Theb.* IV 678); *Hyrcaenae [...]* *leae* (*Theb.* V 204); *Hyrcaena leo Caspius umbra* (*Theb.* VIII 572); *Hyrcaenis [...]* *tigribus* (*Theb.* IX 15–16); *Tigridis Hyrcaenae* (*Theb.* XII 170). The oriental flavour of this simile contributed to the popularisation of this theme in late antiquity literature. Undoubtedly, in the *Thebaid* the references to the wild Hyrcanian cates are used first and foremost to emphasize the madness (*furor*) which plays an important role in the whole poem. See: Hershkowitz 1998: 247–301 (esp. 250–251); Dalby 2000: 187–188.

¹² Szelest 1971: 30–32; Hardie 1983: 128–136; Myers 2000: 134–135; Śniezewski 2010: 47–49.

these ephrases Statius can also give praise to the rich owners of those *villae*.¹³

Manilius Vopiscus, the addressee of the first poem, who is known to us only from Statian poetry, is shown as a versatile man of letters and supporter of Epicurean philosophy. Vopiscus' estate, depicted as a *locus amoenus*, should serve as a place dedicated to intellectual *otium*, especially important for the follower of Epicurus. In lines 99–104 Statius enumerates different literary genres practiced by his addressee and even compares him with Pindar (l. 101). In the last lines of the poem the author wishes Vopiscus happiness and wealth:

*Digne Midae Croesique bonis et Perside gaza,
Macte bonis animi, cuius stagnantia rura
Debuit et flavis Hermus transcurrere ripis
Et limo splendente Tagus! Sic docta frequentes
Otia, sic omni detectus pectora nube
Finem Nestoreae precor egrediare senectae* (ll. 105–110).

Towards the end of this *Silva* the poet makes use of a catalogue of *topoi* connected with wealth. Amongst them we can find *Persis gaza* (l. 105). In the *Silvae* Statius uses the word *gaza* ('treasure', especially 'treasure of the oriental monarch') three times,¹⁴ so in these verses we can see the evident reference to the theme of a rich Eastern king which was created by archaic and classical Greek authors. The poet enumerates Midas, Croesus and the Persian king, three proverbially wealthy oriental rulers, and then he juxtaposes them with the names of two gold-bearing rivers, the Lydian Hermus and the Spanish Tagus.¹⁵ Statius suggests that

¹³ On *Silvae* I 3 and II 2, see: White 1975; Myers 2000; Newlands 2004: 119–198. See also important considerations relating to the issue of wealth in the *Silvae*: Hardie 1983: 174–176; Zeiner 2005 (esp. 75–134); Gibson 2015.

¹⁴ The Romans borrowed the word *gaza* from Greeks. Greek γάζα ('treasure') is considered to be a loanword from Iranian languages in which *gazan/ganz* meant 'treasure' or 'treasury' as well. I would like to thank Professor Kinga Paraskiewicz for drawing my attention to this fact. On this loanword, see also: Dalby 2000: 188; Lipiński 2014.

¹⁵ In *Silvae* I 3 Statius refers frequently to different types of waters, especially rivers and streams. The river Anien flowing through Tibur, river divinities, and the aqueduct *Aqua Marcia* are mentioned several times. Water, together with shade and moderate

Vopiscus would make better use of great wealth accessible to those rulers. What is more, one should emphasize the juxtaposition of Croesus with the king of Persia which appears several times in Latin poetry.¹⁶ The whole passage is designed first and foremost for praising the addressee and showing his great fortune.¹⁷

In *Silvae* II 2 Statius provides a description of the splendid estate of Pollius Felix over the Gulf of Naples. Its owner was allegedly a poet and an explorer of Epicurean philosophy. In his philosophical interests Felix resembles Vopiscus to some extent. Thus Statius addresses him in a similar way and again he includes a reference to Iranian themes in the direct address to his patron:

*Vive, Midae gazis et Lydo ditior auro,
Troica et Euphratae supra diademata felix* (ll. 121-122).

The poet again makes use of the same triad: Midas, Croesus and the Persian king. However, the phrase is different. The noun *gaza* is subordinated to Midas, whereas the ruler of Persia is now symbolized by the *diademata Euphratae* and Croesus by *aurum Lydum*. Furthermore this short catalogue includes another Eastern name, i.e. Troy. It is worth noting that the adjective *felix* (which can be read as a name of the addressee too) corresponds to the Greek adjective *ὄλβιος*, which was frequently used in reference to Asian kings. So again Statius refers to the Greek literary tradition of the East, which serves as a small but subtle ornament in his occasional poetry. Moreover the deployment of that kind of phrases indicates a gradual change in Roman attitude towards wealth and luxury. In the new realities of the Flavian Age, in spite of Vespasian's personal frugality (Tac. *Ann.* III 5), affluence in the private sphere, which until that point had been fully acceptable only in the public sphere, started to

temperature, are the key elements constituting the motif of *locus amoenus*. On this town see also Dalby 2000: 35–36.

¹⁶ Cf. Prop. II 26a, 3–4; Claud. *In Eutr.* I 213; Claud. *In Ruf.* I 198; Sid. *Carm.* IX 30–33.

¹⁷ Hardie 1983: 68–69, 176–179; Newlands 2004: 119–153; Śnieżewski 2010: 124–128; Gibson 2015: 129–131; Dominik 2016: 418–419. Newlands notices the relation of this poem to Horatian works referring to Tibur. She looks for subtle criticism of Vopiscus, who – *invita Minerva* – tries his hand at poetry.

be an important indicator of status, by means of which the addressees of the *Silvae* confirmed their membership in the elites of the empire. The association with the wealth of the Persian kings does not carry such negative overtones anymore as it used to in the Augustan Age (cf. Horace's ode *Carm. I 38: Persicos odi, puer, adparatus*).¹⁸

Rutilius Gallicus, the addressee of *Silvae I 4*, is a person fairly well known from ancient sources. He was a consul, the governor of many provinces and at the end of his life, in the 90s AD he held the honourable office of the prefect of Rome. Statius dedicated to him a poem of the genre *soteria*, i.e. one which expresses thanksgiving upon recovery from illness (in this instance the recovery was short-lived, since – as the poet states in the preface to *Silvae I* – Gallicus died soon after receiving this piece). The author addresses the gods and thanks them for restoring the prefect to health. A lengthy passage of this poem (ll. 61–105) is a speech by Apollo, who shows himself as the god of healing. It is Apollo, not the narrator, who offers words of praise for Gallicus, including a list of offices held by the addressee so far:

*Hunc Galatea vicens ausa est incessere bello
(me quoque!) perque novem timuit Pamphylia messes
Pannoniusque ferox arcuque horrenda fugaci
Armenia et patiens Latii iam pontis Araxes (ll. 76–79).*

In these lines, Apollo mentions Galatia, Pamphylia, Pannonia and Armenia as the regions where Gallicus was active. The phrase *arcuque horrenda fugaci / Armenia* (ll. 78–79) is a manifest allusion to the theme of Parthian horse archer feigning retreat during a battle, which was popular in Augustan literature. This military association was particularly well remembered by the Romans and the Parthian warrior was always associated with a horse and a bow. Statius makes a few references to this theme in the *Silvae*. In turn, the mention of the river Araxes is a clear allusion to the Vergilian phrase *Indomitique Dahae, et pontem indignatus Araxes* (Verg. *Aen.* VIII 728). In the *Aeneid* this verse is part of the description of Octavian's triumph after the battle of Actium and the

¹⁸ Hardie 1983: 67–68; Newlands 2004: 5–6, 154–198; Gauly 2006; Śnieżewski 2010: 131–139; Gibson 2015: 131–132; Dominik 2016: 419.

conquest of Egypt. By means of this reference Virgil announces the future conquest of Armenia and its symbol: the harnessing of the river by building a bridge on it.¹⁹ Statius seems to suggest that the successors of Augustus managed to subjugate Armenia to Rome and thus he praises the current emperor Domitian as well. Admittedly it was not true (actually after the Roman-Parthian war, during the reign of Nero the Roman control over Armenia was weaker than it had been before), but it suited well the panegyric tendencies of Flavian poetry. Thence the figure of Rutilius Gallicus may be seen in some measure as a medium through which the laudatory verses of Statius are transferred on to the emperor.²⁰

Five out of seven poems in Book II of the *Silvae* are *epicedia*, i.e. poems written to console the grieving.²¹ In *Silvae* II 6, a consolatory poem written for Flavius Ursus on the death of his favourite slave (it can be seen as a sign of a changing, more appreciating, attitude towards slaves in general), Statius employs an original association with the Iranian world. He inserts it in the catalogue of behaviours shown after the death of animals:

*Quisnam haec in funera missos
Castiget luctus? Gemit inter bella peremptum
Parthus equum, fidosque canes flevere Molossi,
Et volucres habuere rogam cervusque Maronem* (ll. 17–20).

The poet starts with a rhetorical question: who could restrain grief after the demise of someone dear? Afterwards he shows that it is justifiable to grieve over the death of an animal, and if so, it is all the more appropriate to mourn a person's death.²² In Statius' opinion a Parthian

¹⁹ The aforementioned phrase from the *Aeneid* made Araxes famous in Latin literature. It was mentioned afterwards by such poets as Seneca, Lucan, Statius, Claudian and Sidonius. On the mention of Araxes in *Silvae* V 2, see below.

²⁰ Szelest 1971: 76–84; Hardie 1983: 187–189; Eck 1985; Henderson 1998 (esp. 83–84); Śnieżewski 2010: 177–182. Gallicus was probably the only addressee of Stavian occasional poetry who actually belonged to the political elite of the empire. See Jones 2002: 56; Newlands 2004: 29–30.

²¹ On funeral poems in the poetry of Statius, see: Zabłocki 1965: 170–210; Szelest 1971: 40–57; Śnieżewski 2010: 83–121; Dominik 2016: 429.

²² It is worth noting that the poem on the death of Flavius Ursus' favourite slave follows two *epicedia* on animals: on the death of Atedius Melior's parrot (*Silv.* II 4) and

mourns his horse killed in battle. It is hard to determine the source of this custom. Undoubtedly, the poet assumes a strong emotional relation between the warrior and his horse. Taking into consideration that other examples of animal funerals mentioned by Statius (l. 20) were taken from literature,²³ it may be supposed that the image of the mourning Parthian warrior could have been derived from a literary source. However, it is almost impossible to identify the latter in a precise way.²⁴

The *propempticon* to Metius Celer (*Silv.* III 2), who is heading east so as to take command of one of the legions, gave Statius another occasion to mention Iranian themes. The poet makes two references to them. In the first place he mentions the war with the Parthians while relating the previous stage in the career of Celer, who had served as a military tribune in the eastern provinces:

*Nec novus hospes erit: puer his sudavit in arvis
Notus adhuc tantum maioris lumine clavi,
Iam tamen et turmas facili praevertere gyro
Fortis et Eoas iaculo damnare sagittas* (ll. 123–126).

In those lines Statius reaches for the popular – particularly in Augustan poetry – substitution of the adjective *Parthicus* by a more general word, *Eoas* (literally ‘eastern’).²⁵ This may be concluded on the basis of the fact that this epithet is combined with the noun *sagittae*, which brings to mind the Parthians’ favourite way of fighting. Furthermore, one can identify in this passage some reminiscences of the imagery from Horace’s ode *Carm.* III 2, which offers an account of young Romans’ training for the battle with the army of Arsacids.²⁶ In the final part of

on the death of Domitian’s tame lion (*Silv.* II 5).

²³ The story of the talking crow was told by Pliny the Elder (*Nat. hist.* X 60), whereas the story of the deer, the killing of which by Ascanius triggered a war, by Virgil (*Aen.* VII 483 sqq.).

²⁴ Hardie 1983: 103–110; Śnieżewski 2010: 91–93.

²⁵ *Eois partibus* (Hor. *Carm.* I 35, 31–32); *Eoas pharetras* (Luc. II 55); *Eois furor* (Luc. III 93–94); *Eoas opes* (Ov. *Ars* I 201–202); *Sive aliquid pharetris Augustus parceret Eois* (Prop. IV 6, 81). Statius himself uses *Eois* instead of *Persicus* in *Theb.* XII 617.

²⁶ We can find the following similarities: emphasis on the soldier’s young age (the use of the noun *puer*), on the Romans’ equestrian training (*eques* in Horace, *turmae* in Statius) and spear fighting practice (*hasta* in Horace, *iaculum* in Statius).

Stattius' poem, which anticipates the author's future conversation with Celer, he enumerates the names of some territories under Parthian rule:

*Tu rapidum Euphraten et regia Bactra sacrasque
Antiquae Babylonis opes et Zeugma, Latinae
Pacis iter, qua dulce nemus florentis Idymes,
Quo pretiosa Tyros rubeat, quo purpura suco
Sidoniis iterata cadis, ubi germine primum
Candida felices sudent opobalsama virgae* (ll. 136–141).

These lines seem to be an allusion to Catullus' poem for Veranius (Catul. 9, 6–9), who, having returned from Spain, is going to report on what he saw there. In the same way Celer is going to tell his friends (Stattius amongst them) about different eastern lands, both within the Roman Empire and parts of the Parthian kingdom. From among the dominions of the Arsacids the poet chooses three, the Euphrates, Bactra²⁷ and Babylon, as well as Zeugma, the main crossing of the Euphrates.²⁸ Thus, he enumerates the western and eastern limits of Parthian Empire. To reach Bactra the Romans would have to wage a great campaign but the implication of an imminent war is certainly false, since Domitian during his reign did not plan a full-scale invasion of the eastern neighbour. In turn ascribing great military achievements to Celer in advance should be treated as a hyperbole in an attempt to show the addressee in the best possible light.²⁹

²⁷ Using an adjective *regia* in reference to *Bactra* seems to be another allusion to Horace, who in *Carm.* III 29, 27–28 mentioned *regnata Cyro / Bactra*. Roman poets told willingly about Bactria and its capital Bactra and treated these names as representing the eastern limit of the Arsacid kingdom. Cf. Lerouge 2007: 222–223.

²⁸ In his paper on the role of the Euphrates in Roman-Parthian relations, Edwell (2013: 66) puts emphasis on the fact that during the reign of Vespasian the Romans strengthened their presence in this border territory. Furthermore he reminds that Zeugma was the only crossing of the Upper Euphrates and every army attacking the Parthian Empire was forced to move through this town. On Zeugma see also Edwell 2008: 16–17, 20; Kozłowski 2012: 27, 67, 82.

²⁹ Szelest 1971: 84–92; Hardie 1983: 156–164; Tuplin 1989: 403; Śnieżewski 2010: 159–168. Hardie is surely right, when he states that it is this piece in *Silvae* that shows the greatest influence of Augustan poetry.

The poem on the clipping of Flavius Earinus' hair (*Silv.* III 4) is another piece devoted to the people from the inner circle of Domitian's court. Earinus, a liberated imperial cupbearer, asked Statius for a poem on his hair-clippings, which were offered to the god Asclepius in Pergamum. Although the main idea of this poem is derived from the epigrammatic tradition (that sort of dedicatory epigram was called *anathematicon*), the poet expands it up to 106 lines. In the catalogue of nations included in the middle part of this piece Statius mentions the Persians:

*Care puer superis, qui praelibare verendum
Nectar et ingentem totiens contingere dextram
Electus, quam nosse Getae, quam tangere Persae
Armeniique Indique petunt! O sidere dextro
Edite, multa tibi divum indulgentia favit* (ll. 60–64).

This passage is a part of a greater whole devoted to Domitian himself. The occasion for that is the fact that Earinus serves at emperor's table. Although vocative forms are used here (*care* – l. 60, *edite* – l. 65), it is not the cupbearer but his master who takes centre stage. The catalogue of foreign peoples (the Getae, the Persians, the Armenians and the Indians) serves as a proof of Domitian's worldwide power. By listing those four peoples on a par with one another the author ignores entirely actual differences between them in terms of power and in terms of relation to Rome. Again Statius seems to allude to late Horatian poetry, in which we can find similar catalogues of peoples. They serve to praise the ruler, who managed to ensure security of imperial borders. Therefore, this reference to Iranian (or more generally, oriental) themes should be treated once more as a mere panegyrical element.³⁰

The next catalogue of peoples, very similar to that in the Earinus poem, is included in *Silvae* IV 1, written on the occasion of Domitian's seventeenth (and last, in the event) consulate held in 95 AD. Statius employs a similar device that he used in previous books of the collection, using a speech delivered by a divinity as his medium.³¹ Here, it is Janus,

³⁰ Szelest 1971: 92–96; White 1975: 288–291; Hardie 1983: 121–124; Henriksén 1997; Newlands 2004: 105–118; Śnieżewski 2010: 182–186; Babnis 2016: 182–184.

³¹ Statius made use of this poetic device e.g. in *Silvae* I 4 (Apollo's speech) and III 4 (Venus' speech).

the patron of every beginning, including the beginning of the year, when consuls come into their office. Thus on the one hand Statius dissociates himself from the content of the utterance, but on the other hand he gives it some hallmarks of prophecy. The divine words are finished by another catalogue of peoples:

*Restat Bactra novis, restat Babylona tributis
Frenari; nondum gremio Iovis Indica laurus,
Nondum Arabes Seresque rogant, nondum omnis honorem
Annus habet, cupiuntque decem tua nomina menses* (Il. 40–43).

Janus foretells that Domitian will be triumphant and then he states that there are victories over the eastern nations which are most honourable for him. The Arabs, the Parthians, the Indians and the Seres (i.e. Chinese) are the peoples to be conquered by Rome. Statius enumerates again two cities subordinated to the Arsacids mentioned already in *Silvae* III 2: Bactra and Babylon. Generally it was these two cities belonging to the Parthian Empire that Roman poets referred to most frequently.³² The reason for that could be their connection with Alexander's history: from Bactra he set out to conquer India, whereas in Babylon he died. Catalogues of peoples, very popular in Augustan literature, undergo important changes in the poetry of Statius. In earlier poetry they only included the names of the defeated enemies. Horace in *Carm.* IV 14 modified this scheme by mentioning foreign peoples that had not been defeated by Augustus, but simply admired him. Statius follows suit in Earinus' poem (*Silv.* III 4, 62–63), but later he changes this model, by including

³² Cf. *Persarum statuit Babylona Semiramis urbem* (Prop. III 1, 21); *Bactraque et Aethiopes, Babylon et Susa Ninosque* (Manil. IV 803); *Cumque superba foret Babylon spolianda tropaeis / Ausoniis, umbraque erraret Crassus inulta* (Luc. I 10–11); *Moenia mirentur refugi Babylonia Parthi* (Luc. VI 50); *Babylon Persea* (Luc. VI 449); *armatam rursus Babylona minari / Rege novo* (Claud. *In Eutr.* II 475–476); *Non Artaxata, Susa, Bactra, Carrhas, / Non coctam Babylona personabo* (Sid. *Carm.* IX 21–22). For Roman poets Babylon evoked associations both with the times before Cyrus' conquest and with the contemporary political situation: Mesopotamia was the richest and the most important province of the Parthian Empire. After all, the Romans did not notice the important difference between the Semitic civilization of Mesopotamia and the Iranian (i.e. Indo-European) monarchy of the Achaemenids and the Arsacids. On Bactra, see note 26.

in his catalogue peoples that will be subordinated to Rome in future conquests. This is not surprising, since by that time Domitian (contrary to Augustus) had not achieved any success in the East, whether military or diplomatic, and he could only be praised for his prospective triumphs.³³

Silvae IV 4 is the only poetic letter in Statius' *oeuvre*. The poet addresses it to Vitorius Marcellus, the dedicatée of *Silvae* IV. While it is possible to identify longer passages spoken by a deity in previous works, here it is the personified letter that is the speaker throughout a large part of the poem (ll. 12–105). At the beginning of the relevant passage, Marcellus is encouraged to take a rest, the purposefulness of which is justified in an original way:

*Et sontes operit pharetras arcumque retendit
Parthus et Eleis auriga laboribus actos
Alpheo permulcet equos et nostra fatescit
Laxaturque chelys: vires instigat alitque
Tempestiva quies, maior post otia virtus!
Talis cantata Briseide venit Achilles
Acrior et positis erupit in Hectora plectris.
Te quoque flammabit tacite repertita parumper
Desidia et solitos novus exsultabis in actus* (ll. 30–38).

Statius gives four examples which are to show that people need *otium*. One is the case of a Parthian warrior who puts aside his bow and quiver. Again these two elements of equipment are mentioned because of the strong connection between the Parthians and archery. A loosened bowstring was a symbol of rest, even in the case of gods and kings.³⁴ The employment of the epithet *sontes* ('guilty' – l. 30) to describe a quiver ought to be linked with a lingering memory of the defeats inflicted by the Parthians upon the Roman army in the 1st century BC, but suggests the famous Parthian tactics in feigned retreat as well. All four *exempla* are

³³ Szelest 1971: 20, 125–127; Hardie 1983: 192–194; Coleman 1988: *ad v.* 40–41; Tuplin 1989: 403.

³⁴ Cf. *quondam cithara tacentem / Suscitata Musam neque semper arcum / Tendit Apollo* (Hor. *Carm.* II 10, 18–20). The same idea can be found also in the work of Herodotus (Hdt II 173, 3), where it is Egyptian king Amasis who recommends unstringing a bow after using it.

arranged in a geographical way (Parthia, Greece, Rome), so as to center in ll. 37–38 on the addressee. By dint of this rather humorous passage Statius tries to show his familiarity with Marcellus, but at the same time he alludes to Horatian *Carm.* III 8, in which it was Maecenas whom Horace encouraged to take a rest from the burden of official duties.³⁵

An *epicedium* on the death of Priscilla, the wife of the secretary *ab epistulis*, Abascantus, opens Book V of the *Silvae*. It is not only the deceased Priscilla, but her living husband, a trusted adviser of the emperor, who is praised. A. Hardie suggests even that this poem is ‘a kind of political manifesto’.³⁶ Abascantus’ task, which he always carries out, is to bring reports from different provinces of the empire and from abroad:

quae laurus ab arcto,
Quid vagus Euphrates, quid ripa binominis Histri,
Quid Rheni vexilla ferant, quantum ultimus orbis
Cesserit et refugo circumsona gurgite Thyle (ll. 88–91).

Statius mentions three border rivers, the Euphrates, the Danube and the Rhine, but also the semi-legendary island of Thule.³⁷ The choice of the extreme points of the empire emphasizes Abascantus’ numerous responsibilities, as well as the fact that he enjoys the emperor’s trust.³⁸ The Euphrates is put in this anaphoric enumeration on a par with other limits of the empire. The news from that region was obviously of great interest to Domitian but one can hardly agree with N.C. Debevoise that

³⁵ Szelest 1971: 98–102; Coleman 1988: *ad v.* 30; Śnieżewski 2010: 189–193. It should be pointed out that in *Carm.* III 8 Horace also mentions an Iranian theme, viz. a civil war in the Median (i.e. Parthian) kingdom: *Medus infestus sibi luctuosus / disident armis* (ll. 19–20).

³⁶ Hardie 1983: 186.

³⁷ The geographical names mentioned in this passage bring to mind the famous passage from a choral ode in Seneca’s *Medea* (ll. 369–379) in which the dramatist enumerated the border rivers of the empire (the Araxes, the Rhine, the Elbe) and the Thule as well. However, the function of this enumeration is different in *Medea*, since it shows that the human desire to travel began with the expedition of the Argonauts.

³⁸ In a similar way Statius depicts the tasks set by the emperor to father of Claudius Etruscus (*Silv.* III 3, 85–97) – cf. Gibson 2009: *ad loc.*

Silvae V 1 should be read as a proof of a planned invasion of Parthia.³⁹ As regards the rhetorical function of the *epicedium*, Statius shows a tendency to shift the reader's attention from the deceased to the living. It makes the *epicedium* resemble a panegyric and, so to speak, a two-level one, at that, since it praises both the poet's patron and the emperor himself.⁴⁰

The passage of *Silvae* V 2 dedicated to the young Crispinus, son of Vettius Bolanus, the consul of 66 AD, is much easier to connect with specific political-military circumstances. Statius praises the addressee's father as well (in the part of *encomium* called *genos*, i.e. in the description of the addressee's descent): Bolanus was a general and governor and took part in the Armenian war during the reign of Nero:

*Mox Tyrios ex more sinus tunicamque potentem
Agnovere umeri. Sed enim tibi magna parabat
Ad titulos exempla pater. Quippe ille iuventam
Protinus ingrediens pharetratum invasit Araxen
Belliger indocilemque fero servire Neroni
Armeniam. Rigidi summam Mavortis agebat
Corbulo, sed comitem belli sociumque laborum
Ille quoque egregiis multum miratus in armis
Bolanum* (ll. 29–37).

The role of Bolanus in the fights in Armenia is overstated. Tacitus, the main source on the history of this conflict, mentions him only once as a commander of a legion sent in 62 AD by Corbulo to help Tigranes (Tac. *Ann.* XV 3). In *Silvae* V 2 Bolanus is characterized – out of all proportion – as if he were second-in-command to Corbulo in this hard conflict. To some extent the river Araxes is a synonym for Armenia. The river is given the epithet *pharetratus* (l. 32), which frequently accompanies Eastern geographical names and refers plainly to the favourite

³⁹ Debevoise (1938: 215) mentions many other *loci* in the *Silvae* which according to him should refer to these plans. This opinion was rightly criticized by later scholars, amongst them: Tuplin 1989: 380–382; Jones 2002: 159.

⁴⁰ Zabłocki 1965: 177–179, 187–188; Hardie 1983: 185–187. It's worth noting that Seneca used a similar strategy in his *Consolatio ad Polybium*, when he praised the late Polybius' brother, Polybius himself and finally the emperor Claudius.

way of fighting of the oriental peoples, in this case the Parthians against whom the Romans were waging war in Armenia. In the further part of the poem Statius comes back to Crispinus and in a lengthy passage called by A. Hardie ‘propemptikon in anticipation’ (ll. 132–167) describes the places that may be a future destination for the addressee. He does not fail to mention Armenia, where his father served the empire: *Quod si te magno tellus frenata parenti / Accipiat, quantum ferus exsultabit Araxes!* (ll. 141–142). The Araxes – this time with the epithet *ferus* (‘wild’) – is used again as a synonym for Armenia. The verb *exsulto* (‘jump up with joy’), referring to this river, creates the second allusion in the *Silvae* to the aforementioned verse from *Aeneid* (VII 728). Its purpose is to show that the Araxes, beyond Roman control in the Augustan Age, has now been subjugated to the empire.⁴¹

The last reference to Iranian themes is made by Statius in the *epicedium* on his father (*Silv.* V 3). It is included in a lengthy passage praising the deceased, which takes up the major part of the poem (ll. 104–252). The poet puts emphasis on his father’s personal qualities and literary talents but does not miss the opportunity to mention students his father educated:

*Et nunc ex illo forsán grege gentibus alter
Iura dat Eois, alter compescit Hiberas,
Alter Achaemenium secludit Zeugmate Persen,
Hi dites Asiae populos, hi Pontica frenant,
Hi fora pacificis emendant fascibus, illi
Castra pia statione tenent: tu laudis origo* (ll. 185–190).

Pupils of Statius the Elder – thanks to the education they received in his school – perform important functions in the empire. This passage contains two references to the Parthian Empire. The phrase *alter / Iura dat Eois* (ll. 185–186) is a clear allusion to Horatian *dare iura Medis* (*Carm.* III 3, 44) and Virgilian *per populos dat iura* (*Verg. Georg.* IV 562). Although the adjective *Eois* does not necessarily refer to the Parthians, such a translation is suggested by the similarity to the passage

⁴¹ Szelest 1971: 96–98; Hardie 1983: 146–151; Dalby 2000: 184–185; Gibson 2009: *ad v.* 142; Śnieżewski 2010: 197–201.

from Horace. In reference to another of his father's pupils the poet mentions the fact of holding back the Persians in Zeugma, the main crossing of the upper Euphrates and the place where *legio III Scythica* was stationed. The adjective *Achaemenius* (l. 187) describes the Persians and makes an allusion to the former Achaemenian Empire. This indicates that in his description of the current Parthian Kingdom Statius makes use of associations and epithets that existed already in the literary tradition of Classical Greece. It is hard to determine if Statius the Elder's pupils actually performed the aforementioned functions. The poet seems to dissociate himself from such a precision using the adverb *forsan* (l. 185). However, it cannot be ruled out that the fact that only Eastern peoples and regions are mentioned does indeed indicate the direction in which they were sent.⁴²

In Statius' work the references to the Iranian world are of marginal importance. None of them is the main theme of a poem or at least of a longer passage. The poet uses them first and foremost for ornamental purpose, particularly in similes. These are often complex and they refer to well-known themes associated with the Iranian world (the proverbial wealth of the Persian kings, the Parthian penchant for horse riding and archery). It concerns in equal measure the *Thebaid* and the *Silvae*. Just as it is in the case of former Roman poets, Iranian themes are taken from two main sources: from Greek literary tradition of depicting Achaemenid Persia and from direct political and military relations between Rome and Parthia. Thus, in this respect Statius imitates Augustan poets, particularly Horace, from whom he occasionally borrows entire phrases.⁴³ References to Iranian themes also serve to praise the addressees, especially the emperor Domitian. The small number of references to current Roman-Parthian relations can be justified by a rather peaceful situation on the Euphrates border. Generally, it was wars that accounted for the majority of references to foreign peoples in Latin poetry. The war in Armenia from the times of Nero (symbolised by the river Araxes, men-

⁴² Szelest 1971: 40, 42; Gibson 2009: *ad v.* 185.

⁴³ However, it should be pointed out that the complex simile comparing Thiodamas to the Parthian crown prince (*Theb.* VIII 286–293) and the ending of the “hymn to Apollo” (*Theb.* I 716–720) are fairly original and it is hard to find analogous passages in Latin poetry. On the former A.S. Hollis (1994: 21) aptly stated: ‘Statius has caught the ethos and atmosphere of Parthian royalty with great skill’.

tioned three times in the *Silvae*) is mentioned relatively most frequently. It can be stated that Statian references to Iranian themes suit well his poetics. They create a complex poetic world whose aim was to delight the elite public,⁴⁴ to praise the wealthy patrons and friends as well as to show the great literary talent of Statius, a poet who did not want to be a mere successor and imitator of Augustan authors but by means of new forms wished to express a message appropriate for his own age.⁴⁵

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⁴⁴ N.K. Zeiner rightly called Statius a 'creator of distinction'. The need for distinction was one of the important features of Flavian elites and a praising poet might have been a 'medium' to achieve this goal – see Zeiner 2005.

⁴⁵ 'The *Silvae* are not exercises unimaginatively derivative of the Augustan 'masters' but new poetry which, through its negotiation with previous literature, displays the poet's provocative attempts to find an appropriate voice and idiom for the Flavian age.' – Newlands 2004: 7.

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