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Siege of Saguntum (219 BC) – the ancient foundation of the modern myth**

Oblężenie Saguntu (219 p.n.e.) – antyczne podstawy współczesnego mitu

Abstract: The author of the article has attempted to prove that Saguntum has been included in the pantheon of cities which have played an important role in history. Both the siege of the city by Hannibal and the heroic defence of the inhabitants against the Carthaginians were depicted by the ancient sources in both a vivid (but also an exaggerated) fashion. The convention of presenting the fate of the besieged city was driven by the ideological goals of Roman writing. The siege and the heroic defence which the inhabitants of Saguntum mounted against the invaders became an integral part of the picture, as it demonstrated how the steadfastness of the Romans was greater than that of others. The motif of the heroic defence of Saguntum, deliberately exaggerated in Roman writing, became the mainstay of conservative and patriotic ideals. The myth created by Roman literary circles saw its original function change in later history to highlight the idea of perseverance and heroic defence of a particular nation.

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Keywords: Second Punic War, ancient historiography, siege of Saguntum, heroic topos, national mythology

Streszczenie: Autor artykułu podjął próbę udowodnienia, że Sagunt został włączony do panteonu miast odgrywających istotną rolę w historii. Zarówno oblężenie tego miasta przez Hannibala, jak i heroiczna obrona mieszkańców przed Kartagińczykami zostały przedstawione przez antyczne źródła nie tylko w sposób żywy, ale też znacząco wyolbrzymiony. Konwencja przedstawiania losów oblężonego miasta była napędzana ideologicznymi celami rzymskiego piśmiennictwa. Oblężenie i heroiczna obrona, jaką mieszkańcy Saguntu podjęli przeciwko najeźdźcom, stały się integralną częścią obrazu, który pokazał, że w zakresie swojej niezłomności Rzymianie i ich sojusznicy przewyższali innych. Motyw bohaterskiej obrony Saguntu, celowo wyolbrzymiony w piśmiennictwie rzymskim, stał się ostoją ideałów konserwatywnych i patriotycznych. Mit stworzony przez rzymskie kręgi literackie doczekał się w późniejszych dziejach zmiany swojej pierwotnej funkcji, aby podkreślić ideę wytrwałości i heroicznej obrony danego narodu.

Słowa kluczowe: druga wojna punicka, historiografia antyczna, oblężenie Saguntu, topos bohaterski, mitologia narodowa

Introduction

Hannibal's capture of the Iberian city of Saguntum (219 BC), which heralded the outbreak of the Second Punic War (218–201 BC), was also the first major logistical operation documented in the historical sources; as a result, the Carthaginians seized a wealthy centre with considerable logistical potential.¹ In later history, the heroic defence of the city by its inhabitants would serve as a reference point whenever examples of Spanish heroism and love of independence were discussed.² The modern myth of the defence of Saguntum is, of course, rooted in the ancient story of the

¹ J. C. Domínguez Perez, *El potencial económico de Saiganté como « casus belli » en el estallido de la segunda Guerra Púnica*, "Latomus" 2005, vol. 64, p. 590–600.

² A. Duplá Ansuategui, *The image of Phoenicians and Carthaginians in modern Spanish history and culture*, in: *The ancient Mediterranean Sea in modern visual and performing art: Sailing in troubled waters*, ed. R. Rovira Guardiola, Bloomsbury 2017, p. 216.

steadfast townspeople, not only vividly presented in the sources but also corroborated with respect to several details. Although Livy's tale³ stands out among others, descriptions of the siege are also found in Appian,⁴ Silius Italicus,⁵ Florus,⁶ as well as later authors.⁷ The siege of Saguntum is also mentioned by Polybius, though the sparsity of his account seems somewhat puzzling, especially because the beginning of the war is described in detail and that the lapse of time between the events and his lifetime was the shortest. Meanwhile, in the light of other sources, especially Livy's *Ab Urbe condita*, the description of Hannibal's action at Saguntum appears quite extensive, enabling several methods that had been used to capture this city to be explained. First, any supplies were cut off, which is not surprising, because presumably the Carthaginians followed the principle of using military potential sparingly and wanted to force the surrender of the city prior to active engagement. The experience gained during the battles in Sicily was certainly a major factor here. The situation was, therefore, in line with the operational tactics developed already during standard warfare, in which particular centres were besieged and conquered. One must also consider that the description of the siege may be based on the previous examples and established methods employed in such cases.⁸

Given the above, three key issues give rise to questions. Firstly, there is the heroism of the people of Saguntum, whose depiction is lucid and well highlighted in culture, but which displays certain relevant traits suggesting why the motif was so peculiarly attractive that it became a moralistic model. Secondly, this is coupled with a whole range of statements made by ancient authors, notably Polybius', whose account evidently omits details which would have likely contributed to a substantive and relatively objective description of the siege. Thirdly, the stories of the siege of Saguntum, written mainly based on annals, seem to expand the depiction and exaggerate the

³ Liv. 21.7.4 ff.

⁴ App. *Ib.* 10.39.

⁵ Sil. 1.296–563, 576–583; 2.25–269, 391–474.

⁶ Flor. 1.22.6.

⁷ Eutrop. 3.7.2; Oros. 4.14.1; Zon. 8.21.

⁸ Y. Garlan, *Recherches de poliorcétique grecque*, Paris 1974, p. 257–260.

scale of the operation. Thus, the essential aim of this study is to examine the similarities between the culturally established vision of the siege of Saguntum and the components of the ancient account that may have influenced the creation of the contemporary myth.

The heroes and martyrs of Saguntum: their depiction and the key components of the contemporary myth

When in 1922, Walter Lippman published his tellingly titled *Public Opinion*, the author's claims about politics as a work of fiction verged on science fiction.⁹ An individual, as a socially functioning being dependent on external stimuli, does not have the full capacity to keep up with a flood of information and deal with it rationally. Therefore, we are forced to accept some accounts on faith, constructing and reproducing images that may or may not correspond with reality. This Platonic conviction that false beliefs and ideas do exist paves the way for contemporary myths and stereotypes.¹⁰ A. Duplá Ansuategui explains specific aspects in the story of the heroic people of Saguntum with reference to their oppressors, the Carthaginians. He notes that, according to the classical historical narrative, the Phoenicians had travelled to the ancient Iberian Peninsula to find natural resources, but as cunning traders, they deceived the good-willed natives who inhabited that land of happiness.¹¹ This unique image of a "paradise on earth" may have been due to the accounts of ancient authors and subsequent studies, which located the legendary kingdom of Tartessos¹² in the Iberian Peninsula. Duplá Ansuategui observes that the Carthaginians also came to Spain with similar intentions, although their aims were already imperialistic. Here, Duplá Ansuategui draws attention to a characteristic historical moment in which the Carthaginian plans encountered a serious obstacle in the form of

⁹ M. Curtis, *Introduction to the transaction edition*, in: W. Lippman, *Public opinion*, New Jersey 1991, p. XI–XXXVI.

¹⁰ W. Lippman, *op. cit.*, p. 5, 262.

¹¹ A. Duplá Ansuategui, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹² J. B. Tsirkin, *The Phoenicians and Tartessos*, "Gerión" 1997, vol. 15, p. 243–251.

fierce resistance from the inhabitants of Saguntum.¹³ Given such facts, their actions have been characterised by the creation of a myth about the roots of patriotic attitudes, according to which it is necessary to defend “one’s” land against “strangers/invaders”.

The war waged for the sake of defending Saguntum became the first of the major historical episodes that made up Spanish national mythology. The theme followed the predominant nineteenth-century interpretation, according to which Hannibal, seeking imperialist success and acting dishonestly, was confronted with the heroism of the inhabitants of Saguntum. As J. García Cardiel rightly observes, the nineteenth-century nexus of politics, culture and history became increasingly stronger and resonated correspondingly in culture, nurturing the development of historical painting, for instance, in which political requirements became more important than arts, and even resulted in the alleged obsession with historical accuracy attributed to the very illustrators and authors of themes in historical painting. Consequently, as García Cardiel underlines, the Spanish collective imagination saw the emergence of mythologemes (*mythologemas*), which served current political objectives and still function today in the collective memory as a result.¹⁴ The importance of heroic resistance mounted by inhabitants of Saguntum was represented in a painting entitled *Ultimo día de Sagundo* (1869), whose creator, Domingo Marqués, depicted Hannibal exhorting his troops to put up a fiercer fight to finally break the stalwart opposition of the townspeople. A woman attempts to stop Hannibal as he rushes through the clamour of battle and piles of corpses. Meanwhile, the smoke rising above the burning city announces that the end of the siege is indeed near. This image, probably inspired by the famous mosaic of Alexander, is intended to highlight the principal myth of how the indomitable spirit of the Spaniards, who prefer death to the loss of freedom, keeps the invader at bay.¹⁵ *El*

¹³ A. Duplá Ansuategui, op. cit., p. 216.

¹⁴ J. García Cardiel, *La conquista romana de Hispania en el imaginario pictórico español (1754–1894)*, “Cuadernos de Prehistoria y Arqueología Universidad Autónoma de Madrid” 2010, vol. 36, p. 131–157.

¹⁵ F. Quesada Sanz, *En torno al ‘Ultimo día de Sagundo’ de Francisco Daminguo Maqués y el ‘Mosaico de Alejandro’*, “Anuario del Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte” 1995–1996, vol. 7–8, p. 223–228; A. Duplá Ansuategui, op. cit., p. 217–219.

sacrificio de las saguntinas, the painting by María Soledad Garrido y Agudo, which was first exhibited in 1878,¹⁶ explores the same theme, though it does not fully comply with the convention. Finally, the heroic imagery of the Saguntines is epitomised in the famous 1888 sculpture, whose author, Agustín Querol (1860–1909), depicted a woman who commits suicide by killing herself with a dagger.¹⁷

These representations gained a certain reach and social resonance; moreover, they perpetuated the “mythological” image of the defence of Saguntum as time went by.¹⁸ This must have had more serious consequences for the formation of the stereotypical narrative of the events at Saguntum. It is worth underlining that as late as 1962, school textbooks proclaimed that, although the Phoenicians had made a specific and undeniable contribution to the development of civilisation by broadening the horizons of other peoples (and by spreading the alphabet as an important tool of exchanging ideas), they were driven by negative personality traits with greed at the fore.¹⁹ This caused them to be dishonest in their dealings with the Spanish. The entire argument was supposed to underscore the notion that “The courage, the heroic resistance to death, is a permanent Spanish virtue”.

In reality – as Duplá Ansuategui aptly notes – that statement derived exclusively from the most anti-Punic ancient literary sources, which remained unquestioned until the last decades of the last century. How unreflective

¹⁶ J. García Cardiel, op. cit., p. 133.

¹⁷ A. Duplá Ansuategui, op. cit., p. 221.

¹⁸ Incidentally, Saguntum occupies a prominent place among the cities mentioned in Silius Italicus’ *Punica*, finding itself alongside such major centres as Troy, Carthage, Capua, and Syracuse; this is a noteworthy point to consider in studying the roles that individual cities played in shaping the concept of the Roman world. Cf. R. Cowan, *In my beginning is my end. Origins, cities and foundations in Flavian epic*, Oxford 2002 (Diss.); W. J. Dominik, *The reception of Silius Italicus in modern scholarship*, in: *Brill’s companion to Silius Italicus*, ed. A. Augoustakis, Leiden–Boston 2010, p. 447.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Latacz, *Die Phönizier bei Homer*, in: *Die Phönizier im Zeitalter Homers*, ed. U. Gehring, Mainz 1990, p. 11–21.

and uncritical the use of antique stories was at times can only be understood by re-reading the relevant passages of ancient accounts of the events at Saguntum.²⁰

Saguntum in the light of ancient narrative sources. The standard of Carthaginian *poliorkia*?

A detailed, perhaps even the most detailed description of a siege laid by Hannibal is none other than Saguntum, which seems symptomatic and puzzling at the same time. The Carthaginian commander is known to have carried out several operations against various cities in the course of his campaigns, which reached their apogee during his campaign in Italy.²¹ In this context, the capture of Saguntum – located on the Iberian Peninsula – is surprisingly vividly described, which can be preliminarily explained by the fact that it was the first operation which, as depicted in ancient literature, could have served as a kind of reference point to which subsequent Carthaginian enterprises may have been compared. In this context, the lack of pertinent detail in Polybius seems particularly interesting. This is an important point given the problematic nature of the original account on which this model action conducted by the Carthaginian commander is based. It is worth noting that the history of Carthaginian operations in the Iberian Peninsula before the outbreak of the Second Punic War²² does not offer particularly extensive material on sieges conducted in that area.²³

Nevertheless, the remains of defensive buildings in Iberian cities (especially important for the time interval between the sixth and third centuries BC) allow us to reach important conclusions. Systematically analysed archaeological material enables us to discuss Iberian defensive architecture,

²⁰ A. Duplá Ansuategui, op. cit., p. 216.

²¹ M. Wolny, *Equitum peditumque idem longe primus erat – uwagi o sprzęcie oblężniczym Hannibala* [*Equitum peditumque idem longe primus erat – Remarks on Hannibal's siege equipment*], "Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki" 2022, vol. 67/2, p. 99–112.

²² R. M. Errington, *Rome and Spain before The Second Punic War*, "Latomus" 1970, vol. 29, p. 25–57.

²³ W. Huss, *Geschichte der Karthager*, München 1985, p. 270–283.

and consequently also to describe the military operations that were conducted there.²⁴ The conclusions reached by P. Moret in that regard are by no means self-evident. The scholar pointed to the need to move away from the Hellenocentric model, implying the assumption that those activities leading to the creation of defensive buildings were not a response to the development of offensive techniques disseminated in the western Mediterranean.²⁵ In his polemic with the theses contained in the publication of F. Gracia Alonso,²⁶ the scholar pointed out that unequivocally proving the influence of Greek military practice would require confirmation that the elites of Iberian cities were familiar with these military ideas. In addition, it would be necessary to prove that the Iberians practiced Hellenistic sieges, using all the instruments known in the world at that time. Moret ironically argues that both assumptions are not provable.²⁷

The defensive buildings of the Iberian Peninsula in pre-Roman times (until the fall of Numantia in 133 BC) remain largely original.²⁸ For this reason, inscribing the Carthaginian action at Saguntum into any scheme can be illusory. This issue was outlined slightly differently in Roman historiography. The siege and capture of Saguntum is one of the most important

²⁴ F. Gracia Alonso, *Análisis táctico de las fortificaciones ibéricas*, “Gladius” 2000, vol. 20, p. 131–170.

²⁵ P. Moret, *Les fortifications ibériques, de la fin de l'âge du Bronze à la conquête romaine*, Madrid 1996, p. 255–256.

²⁶ F. Gracia Alonso, op. cit., p. 157.

²⁷ P. Moret, *El buen uso de las murallas ibéricas*, “Gladius” 2001, vol. 21, p. 139: *Para aceptar estas aseveraciones, se necesitaría lógicamente la comprobación de dos hechos: 1/ que los tratados militares helenísticos, o las ideas contenidas en ellos, eran conocidos en la clase dirigente de las ciudades ibéricas, y 2/ que los iberos practicaban asedios al estilo helenístico, usando cercos, zapas, artificios varios y artillería de máquinas de torsión. Ambas cosas son indemostrables. Una acumulación abigarrada de citas de todas épocas y de excursus sobre los asirios, los cartagineses, Homero o la guerra de Cien Años, no pueden paliar la falta de evidencias.*

²⁸ On Carthaginian influences, see P. Barceló, *Karthago und die iberische Halbinsel von den Barkiden. Studien zur karthagischen Präsenz im westlichen Mittelmeerraum von Gründung von Ebusus (VII. Jh. V. Chr.) bis zum Übergang Hamilcars nach Hispanien (237 v. Chr.)*, Bonn 1988. Details of urban development on the example of Saguntum analyses J. J. Ferrer-Maestro, *Saguntum: The remains of an honorary arch and urban planning outside the city walls*, “European Journal of Archaeology” 2020, vol. 23/1, p. 43–63.

accounts of the kind carried out by the Carthaginian command. However, even here specific problems emerge from the given description. The siege and subsequent capture of the city has been overshadowed in modern historiography by the importance of the event for the political background of the Roman-Carthaginian conflict, especially the causal factor (*cassus belli*) without which, according to theories promoting the Roman point of view, the events leading up to the outbreak of the Second Punic War would be difficult to comprehend.²⁹ The Carthaginian operation at Saguntum was integrated into the entire framework of providing information, with a notable hint in Polybius, who states that the Romans abandoned the war council and took steps against Carthage, yet they did so only when they had learned of the capture of Saguntum by Hannibal: *οἱ δὲ Ῥωμαῖοι, προσπεπτωκίας αὐτοῖς ἤδη τῆς τῶν Ζακανθαίων ἀλώσεως, οὐ μὰ Δία περὶ τοῦ πολέμου τότε διαβούλιον ἤγον.*³⁰ During the narrative, Polybius directs further discussion onto a completely different track; he implicitly leaves a major doubt as to the attitude of the Romans during the ongoing siege of the city. His account offers no indication that the Romans took any interest in the siege of the city or took steps to relieve the plight of the inhabitants of Saguntum. Polybius is thus prudently reticent concerning the passive stance of the Romans, while admitting that the city was taken by violence (*τούτους κατὰ κράτος ἐαλωκίας αὐτῆς τῆς πόλεως*).³¹

Such a structure, essentially a backdrop for exploring the complex origins of the Second Punic War, could not be elaborated upon in case it should draw the reader's attention to the siege of Saguntum and provoke

²⁹ Some of the crucial works concerning the issue include: J. Carcopino, *Le traité d'Hasdrubal et la responsabilité de la deuxième guerre punique*, "Revue des Études Anciennes" 1953, vol. 55, p. 258–293; P. Bender, *Untersuchungen zur Vorgeschichte des zweiten punischen Krieges*, Hamburg 1954; A. E. Astin, *Saguntum and the Origins of the Second Punic War*, "Latomus" 1967, vol. 26, p. 577–596; D. Hoyos, *Unplanned wars: The origins of the First and Second Punic Wars*, Berlin–New York 1998. Several interesting conclusions are advanced in H. Beck, *The reasons for the War*, in: *A companion to The Punic Wars*, ed. D. Hoyos, Malden 2011, p. 230–233.

³⁰ Plb. 3.20.1.

³¹ Plb. 3.20.2.

uncomfortable questions.³² Even if Polybius had had accurate knowledge of how the military operation proceeded,³³ he had to forgo dwelling on the details of the city's capture.³⁴ This would account for the absence of particulars in a source on which historians, despite a few reservations, could nevertheless pin their greatest hopes.³⁵

However, the Carthaginian operation at Saguntum presented by Polybius undoubtedly stands out among other, later authors, who had already

³² It seems unlikely that throughout the siege the Romans remained unaware of the fate of the city which suffered oppression at the hands of Hannibal. Meanwhile, the latter was able to operate in relative comfort, fearing neither any Roman force coming to relieve the city, nor attacks from the inhabitants' countrymen: a completely different situation than Caesar had had to confront when he embarked on the siege of Alesia. See J. Harmand, *Une campagne Césarienne: Alésia*, Paris 1967. Such an idea is unreasonable to say the least, for how did the Romans, who supposedly had no knowledge of what was going on for months at Saguntum, promptly learn about the fall of the city. Naturally, this does not mean other authors failed to have note that Saguntum received no aid from the Romans. Liv. 21.11.12 implies that it was the distance which prevented the Romans from reaching Saguntum, as he laments the fate of the Saguntines losing hope of any outside help, since the Romans were so far away and everything around was held by the enemy: *simul crescit inopia omnium longa obsidione et minuitur expectatio externae opis, cum tam procul Romani, unica spes, circa omnia hostium essent*. The argument qualifies as a "rational" one, but others were offered as well: S. Śnieżewski, *The poetic structure of Silius Italicus' Punica (books I–V)*, "Classica Cracoviensia" 2019, vol. 22, p. 95, notes that relying on the accounts of antique authors – Livy in particular – Silius seeks to vindicate the absence of Roman military aid for Saguntum by quoting the unjust will of the gods.

³³ Concerning the sources used by Polybius, see J. Bonquet, *Polybius on the critical evaluation of historians*, "Ancient Society" 1982/1983, vol. 13–14, p. 277–291; por. L. I. Hau, *Moral history from Herodotus to Diodorus Siculus*, Edinburgh 2016, p. 29–30, 41–48 (moral principles governing the selection of sources).

³⁴ Plb. 3.17.8 ff; Cf. F. W. Walbank, *A historical commentary on Polybius*, vol. 2, Oxford 1967, p. 327–328; W. Huss, op. cit., p. 282.

³⁵ H. Erbse, *Zur Entstehung des polybianischen Geschichtswerke*, "Rheinisches Museum" 1951, vol. 94, p. 157–179; R. Koerner, *Polybios als Kritiker früher Historiker*, Jena 1957 (Diss.); E. W. Marden, *Polybios as military historian*, "Entretiens Hardt" 1974, vol. 20, p. 267 ff; L. Poznanski, *Essai de reconstruction de traité de tactique de Polybe d'après le livre III des histoires*, "L'Antiquité Classique" 1980, vol. 49, p. 161–172; J. Bonquet, op. cit., p. 277–291; J. Davidson, *Polybius, w: The Roman historians*, ed. A. Feldherr, Cambridge 2009, p. 123–136.

treated the siege and capture of Saguntum with more attention.³⁶ Even so, a general appraisal of how they spoke of the siege contains traces of the original account. Although the mediation of the annals is unquestionable here, numerous details, which were probably processed by Fabius Pictor,³⁷ could have originated from a source on the Carthaginian side. This is the reasoning adopted by A. Klotz, who assumed that the primary account is likely to have come from Silenos.³⁸ Hence, if details about the siege of Saguntum were to be found in that descriptive account in Greek, then adoption of the theory put forward by the German scholar warrants the inference that several of Hannibal's later military operations involving sieges could have followed the repertoire of methods used at Saguntum. This may lead to the conclusion that the siege and seizure of the Spanish city would have been a model for the Carthaginian tactics. This appears to be attested by the description of several elements routinely occurring in sieges.

City blockade (περιτειχισμός)

Blockading the city, a method described by Appian,³⁹ was indeed employed at Saguntum and shows that the attackers relied on a well-known standard, referred to in Greek as περιτειχισμός. The Alexandrian author states that Hannibal crossed the Ebro by night and first wreaked havoc on the open countryside (τὴν χώραν ἐπόρθει), then moved siege machines to assail Saguntum.⁴⁰ Unable to capture the city by direct assault, he surrounded it with a ditch and ramparts, encircled it with numerous watchtowers, of

³⁶ U. Händl-Sagawe, *Der Beginn des 2. Punischen Krieges. Ein historisch-kritischer Kommentar zu Livius Buch 21*, München 1995, p. 68ff.

³⁷ D. Timpe, *Fabius Pictor und die Anfänge der römischen Historiographie*, "Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt" 1.2, Berlin 1972, p. 928–968.

³⁸ A. Klotz, *Livius und seine Vorgänger*, vol. 2, Leipzig–Berlin 1941, p. 123.

³⁹ App. *Ib.* 10.39.

⁴⁰ App. *Ib.* 10.39: καὶ τῆς ἐπιούσης νυκτὸς παντὶ τῷ στρατῷ τὸν Ἰβηρα διαβάς τὴν χώραν ἐπόρθει καὶ τῆ πόλει μηχανήματα ἐφίστη.

which he made the rounds in person.⁴¹ In Appian's account in Greek, one encounters striking details which seem to make up a coherent, though regrettably rather general, picture of the entire siege.⁴² The characteristic elements included the aforesaid excavation of a ditch (ἀποταφρεύω) to enclose the city, as well as the construction of the watchtowers (φρούριοι). It is also explicitly stated that those measures were introduced around (περιθέω) the city.⁴³ Although Appian mentions a siege machine (μηχάνημα), he does not provide their quantity, nor does he specify what kind of equipment it was. However, the situation he outlined amounts to a logical whole because he details laying waste to the land, which the Carthaginians probably considered their own (which is why Appian spoke of χώρα), to preclude any potential relief at Saguntum. Since Hannibal had pacified the area first, he probably reckoned with the necessity of staying longer at Saguntum;⁴⁴ therefore, the information concerning the unsuccessful assault can only be an annalistic component, not necessarily reflecting the reality of events. The elements referred to by Appian make it clear that the essential method to subdue Saguntum – as adopted at the outset – was to impose a blockade of the city and force a surrender. In consequence, no succour would have reached Saguntum.

Conventional offensive operations

Nevertheless, one cannot rule out that, once the situation in the blockaded city had been reconnoitred, a parallel offensive action was initiated. This did not go beyond the established standard either, while the solution drew on siege techniques in the early Hellenistic period, with examples provided by

⁴¹ App. *Ib.* 10.39: ἐλεῖν δ' οὐ δυνάμενος ἀπετάφρευε καὶ φρούρια πολλὰ περιθεῖς ἐκ διαστημάτων ἐπεφοίτα.

⁴² Ch. G. Liedl, *Appians <Annibaïke>: Aufbau – Darstellungstendentzen – Quellen*, “Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt” II, 34.1, p. 429–462.

⁴³ App. *Ib.* 10.39.

⁴⁴ That tactical approach would also characterise the operations in Italy, as in the case of Tarentum: Liv. 24.20.9.

Diodorus.⁴⁵ The details of the offensive operation hinted at by Appian are elaborated by Livy, who relates that Hannibal personally led the expedited movement of the siege tower (*turris*), which was higher than the city walls and was to be moved closer to the fortifications of Saguntum.⁴⁶ It follows from the description that the tower was two-storeyed, which made it possible to place troops equipped with ballistae and catapults on each level to fire on the defenders of Saguntum, who took their positions on the walls and drove them from their positions.⁴⁷ This provided sufficient cover for troops to start digging a tunnel. The Roman author also notes that this was not a particularly difficult task (*nec erat difficile opus*), since the stone blocks were not bound by lime-reinforced material (*non calce durata erant*), but only by clay mortar (*sed interlita luto structurae*), since the fortifications of the city had been erected using an old method of construction (*antiquo genere*).⁴⁸

Thanks to these efforts, the wall was easily tunnelled under, crumbling around the places where the pickaxes were used. Whole detachments of Hannibal's troops were able to enter the city through the resulting breaches in the walls.⁴⁹ Livy also reports that once the Carthaginians had penetrated behind the city fortifications, a forward position was seized in Saguntum proper: a hill located within the city, which was a kind of temporary fortress (*castellum*) for the conquerors.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Diod. 19.75.5; R. A. Billows, *A Antigonos The One-Eyed and the creation of the hellenistic state*, London 1990, p. 121–125.

⁴⁶ Liv. 21.11.7: *ipse Hannibal qua turris mobilis omnia munimenta urbis superans altitudine agebatur hortator aderat*. For more information on the remains allowing the reconstruction of the city's buildings, see *Opulentissima Saguntum*, eds. P. P. Ripolles Alegre, M. M. Llorens Forcada, Sagunto 2004, p. 24 ff.

⁴⁷ Liv. 21.11.7: *quae cum admota catapultis ballistisque per omnia tabulata dispositis muros defensoribus nudasset*.

⁴⁸ Liv. 21.11.8.

⁴⁹ Liv. 21.11.9: *itaque latius quam qua caederetur ruebat, perque patentia ruinis agmina armatorum in urbem vadebant*.

⁵⁰ Liv. 21.11.10. Based on Livy's account, it may be inferred that the attackers fought their way into a part of the city where they gained foothold and secured it, having encircled it with a wall (*haberent muro circumdant*); further complete detachments were brought there, along with catapults and ballistas. That wedge driven into the city was intended

Battering rams were effectively used during the siege of Saguntum as well. One learns from Livy's account that, with the help of three such implements (*tribus arietibus*), Maharbal managed to make a breach in the wall.⁵¹ According to Silius Italicus, the defenders of the city who manned the ramparts were also regularly bombarded; projectiles were also thrown straight at the walls.⁵² Although the defenders tried to repair the damage to the wall as quickly as possible, they did not prevent further losses: in another part of the city, a defensive tower collapsed, and the Carthaginians forced their way through the rubble.⁵³ Saguntum fell after eight months of siege⁵⁴ which, considering the techniques used, as well as the tactical and numerical superiority of the Carthaginians, seems quite astonishing. If one attempts to determine why the siege lasted so long, the sturdy fortifications of Saguntum are the most likely answer, as well as the logistical hinterland of the city and the supplies accumulated there. But is this a conclusive answer? After all, one cannot resist the impression that both the scale of the resources involved and the relative scarcity of information on the specific actions undertaken by the defenders of Saguntum warrants the suspicion that the asserted siege duration given is the result of exaggeration in the sources, which sought to underscore that Hannibal was a particularly dangerous enemy. This kind of treatment seems to be in line with the desire to emphasise the perseverance of the inhabitants of Saguntum, which was juxtaposed with the successful steadfastness of the Romans that emerges from the later pages of the Roman story.

to confine the defensive space available to the Saguntines who, for their part, could not ignore such a development. Livy states that the besieged also began to erect walls to protect that part of the city which had not yet been captured (*et Saguntini murum interiorem ab nondum capta parte urbis ducunt*).

⁵¹ Liv. 21.12.2.

⁵² Sil. 1.322–351.

⁵³ Liv. 21.14.2.

⁵⁴ Liv. 21.15.3.

Unconventional defensive measures: the *phalarica*

The extent of exaggeration can be seen in the description of the unconventional combat equipment used at Saguntum. Livy states that the inhabitants of the besieged town disposed of a *phalarica*-type projectile, which consisted of a fir-wood javelin with a rounded shaft and a quadrangular long iron spearhead, as in a *pilum*.⁵⁵ Furthermore, in his account of the capture of the Spanish city by Hannibal, Silius Italicus mentions a projectile of that type.⁵⁶ In his commentary to the English translation of Silius, J. D. Duff notes that it was a projectile of the largest dimensions, hurled by special machines placed on siege towers. He also specifies that this wooden projectile was equipped with an iron head, behind which there was a combustible material with tar. This charge was set on fire before the projectiles were fired.⁵⁷ This reconstruction correlates with further information in Silius, whose account mentions a machine described as a *ballista*.⁵⁸ Duff assumes that it may have functioned as a missile launcher, presumably made in Massalia, a colony of the Phocaeans from Asia Minor.⁵⁹ P. Moret considers this information to be an invention of Silius. According to this scholar, we are dealing here with a fantastic description created as a result of the exaggeration of the account of Livy.⁶⁰

In his description of the siege, Livius also provides interesting information on sowing panic in the ranks of the besieging troops, to which the use of the *phalarica* missile apparently contributed. The author writes that the projectiles were aimed at the armour of the besiegers, and even if the projectile did not manage to penetrate into the body, the fact that it was ignited, and the plume of fire grew during flight, forced the victim to cast

⁵⁵ Liv. 21.8.10: *phalarica erat Saguntinis missile telum hastili abiegno et cetera tereti praeterquam ad extremum unde ferrum exstabat.*

⁵⁶ Sil. 1.351: *librari multa consueta phalarica dextra.*

⁵⁷ J. D. Duff, *Commentary*, w: Silius Italicus, *Punica*, vol. 1, trans. J. D. Duff, London 1961, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Sil. 1. 334–335: *adductis stridula / nervis Phocais effundit vastos balista molares.*

⁵⁹ J. D. Duff, *op. cit.*, p. 29; G. P. Shipp, *Ballista*, “Glotta” 1961, vol. 39, p. 149–152.

⁶⁰ P. Moret, *El buen uso de las murallas ibéricas*, p. 141.

off his armour and exposed the unprotected body to an even easier hit by other projectiles.⁶¹

That somewhat dramatic depiction certainly does not deserve total credibility. Naturally, the inhabitants of Saguntum may have had some defensive traditions inherited from the Massalioetes, but it does not change the fact that such a methodical use of defensive weapons, combined with the bombardment of the besiegers, does not seem probable, since it implies a substantial combat capacity, which may have hypothetically resulted from the long-standing defensive traditions of Saguntum. However, this was not the case. After all, there is no historical evidence suggesting that Saguntum had been attacked previously, and its population had lived in anticipation of another siege.⁶² Only such circumstances would explain such a well-organised defence system. The description of the exchange of projectiles using the phalarica certainly serves narrative purposes only, as Livy explicitly asserts that the Carthaginians withdrew from Saguntum precisely due to the phalarica being fired. Towards the end of the first part of the description of the siege, he builds characteristic tension, intimating that the battle remained inconclusive for a long time and that the inhabitants of the city resisted against all hope (*et Saguntinis quia praeter spem resisterent creuissent animi*), thus discouraging the Carthaginians from further assault.⁶³ The interval created by Livy between this and the next stage of the siege is intended to foster the belief in the steadfastness of the inhabitants of the besieged city, who would not easily succumb to Hannibal. From the standpoint of *Ab Urbe condita*, this is another portrayal of the Carthaginians as a difficult enemy, enabling the author to demonstrate key Roman virtues.

⁶¹ Liv., 21.8.11–12; F. Gracia Alonso, op. cit., p. 141.

⁶² This is supported by the passage in Liv. 21.11.8, which refers to an old type of defences at Saguntum and the relative ease with which the walls surrounding the city were destroyed and breached. Cf. F. Romeo Marugán, J. I. Garay Toboso, *El asedio y toma de Sagunto según Tito Livio XXI. Comentarios sobre aspectos técnicos y estratégicos*, “Gerión” 1995, vol. 13, p. 248–252.

⁶³ Liv. 21.9.1–2.

Heroism of the inhabitants of Saguntum as a topos. Survival of the contemporary myth

The second instalment of the story in Livy ends dramatically when some of its inhabitants commit suicide and, in quick succession, the wall of the city's main stronghold collapses.⁶⁴ The motif of death, inflicted by the city's inhabitants on themselves, is rendered even more vivid in Florus' account. The author states that, exhausted by the protracted siege, the inhabitants of Saguntum did not want to surrender to the Carthaginians, nor did they want to aid their oppressors in any way, so they destroyed their possessions. They then killed each other and let the pyre they had previously laid consume their bodies.⁶⁵ Florus also reports that, in a dramatic act of self-destruction, women were murdered to protect them from rape, while children were killed to spare them the cruelty they might have suffered from the hands of the Carthaginians. Appian also says that at the critical moment of the battle, the wives of the combatants allegedly committed suicide, throwing themselves from the roofs of houses, and others hanged themselves.⁶⁶ Moreover, Appian speaks of infanticide, which the mothers supposedly committed to prevent their children from suffering.

A perusal of all those accounts together seems to reveal traces of an older dramatic description the authors mentioned above had used.⁶⁷ Although collective suicides committed to avoid suffering at the hands of the conqueror are reported in ancient literature, as exemplified by the siege of Abydos,⁶⁸ the mass suicide committed by the inhabitants of Saguntum aligns with the compositional principles of the ancient account, in which it lends dramatic

⁶⁴ Liv. 21.14.1–2.

⁶⁵ Flor., I, 22, 6: *Saguntini interim iam novem mensibus fessi fame machinisferro, versa denique in rabiem fide inmanem in foro excitant rogam, tum desuper se sousque cum omnibus opibus suis ferro et igne corrumpunt.*

⁶⁶ App. *Ib.* 12.46.

⁶⁷ It is likely that the Carthaginians created their own account, in which the motif of fear was highlighted for the purposes of propaganda. It was for that reason that Polybius omitted it in his story. His reluctance towards the Carthaginian account is palpable in Plb. 3.20.5.

⁶⁸ Plb. 16.34.3–5; F. W. Walbank, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

quality to the events and convinces the reader that the inhabitants of the city found themselves in a situation from which there was no way out. Other sources, whose authors may have been acquainted with an account of those harrowing events, state that the city was annihilated.⁶⁹ One of the key words here is ἀπώλεια, which Polybius employs to denote all the misfortunes that the inhabitants of Saguntum suffered,⁷⁰ albeit without questioning the account that he may have considered unreliable. By doing so, the Greek historian distanced himself from iterating the depiction of oppression, which was nevertheless readily used by later historians, who coupled it with important elements of the paradigm which promoted the Roman vision of history.

From the point of view of the components conducive to the construction of the myth of Saguntum's defense, those sources that contained intellectual assessments of events – which were presented from the perspective of a longer time distance – seem to be significant. According to Silius, Saguntum became an important symbol of the heroic defense of the city against a strongly determined invader. Regarding *Punica*, M. T. Schettino sees the events as an important point in the struggle between civilisations,⁷¹ which is a development of the hypothesis put forward in the critical commentary by F. Spaltenstein. The scholar believed that Hannibal's attack on Saguntum was to symbolise the attack on Rome.⁷² Saguntum was bound to Rome not only by treaties but also by moral obligations. M. von Albrecht tried to clarify this matter, claiming that the fight for Saguntum was based on *fides*, and a key component of the defense of the inhabitants was the observance of the alliance. Through the destruction of the city, Hannibal formally invaded Italy. The inhabitants of Saguntum regarded themselves as defenders of Italy, and their heroic deeds were to help create a moral ex-

⁶⁹ Plb. 3.30.3; Diod. 25.15; App. *Ib.* 12.44–47; *Hann.* 3.12; Flor. 1.22.4.6; Cf. Sil. 2.475–695; Amm. 15.10.10; Auct. *vir.ill.* 42.2; Eutrop. 3.7.3; Oros. 4.14.1; Zon. 8.21.7–12; J. Seibert, *Forschungen zu Hannibal*, Darmstadt 1993, p. 136.

⁷⁰ Plb. 3.30.3.

⁷¹ M. T. Schettino, *Sagunto e lo Scoppio della Guerra in Silio Italico*, “Aevum Antiquum” (N.S.) 2006, vol. 6, p. 57.

⁷² F. Spaltenstein, *Commentaire des Punica de Silius Italicus (livres I à VIII)*, Geneva 1986, 1.269.

ample of defense.⁷³ Undoubtedly, looking at the fate of Saguntum through the perspective of the Flavians era seems to determine new elements concerning the stages of myth construction. This process was connected with an ideological attempt to treat all elements of the empire in a communal way. In theory, the communities of all parts of the Roman state were to feel responsible for the security and well-being of the empire. In the light of the literary eloquence of *Punica*, the struggle near the Spanish city is fought in the foreground of the actual confrontation. D. T. McGuire sees the Saguntum described by Silius as an introduction to the actual confrontation,⁷⁴ while W. J. Dominik sees in this presentation a surrogate Rome.⁷⁵ At the same time, Silius extends his narrative of the episode related to the attack on Saguntum far beyond the actual historical context, to expose the programmatic goals of his work. This consists of narrative interventions as a result of which, at various levels of the work, Silius directs to his reader instructions on reading and understanding the text.⁷⁶ C. Stocks accepts this point of view, but points to another important aspect concerning the perception of Hannibal. According to her, the Iberian city was to be an arena where the Carthaginian realised his full potential as a warrior, thus providing a point of comparison for his later successes and failures.⁷⁷ Against this background, Hannibal's spirit of steadfastness was outlined. The Carthaginian will have to face a worthy opponent who, therefore, will prove to be stronger than him.

⁷³ M. von Albrecht, *L'Italia in Silio Italico*, in: *Studi di filologia classica in onore di Giusto Monaco: Volume III: Letteratura latina dall'età del basso impero*, Palermo 1991, p. 1184–1185.

⁷⁴ D. T. McGuire, *Textual strategies and political suicide in Flavian epic*, "Ramus" 1989, vol. 18, p. 35.

⁷⁵ W. J. Dominik, *Hannibal at the gates: Programatising Rome and Romanitas in Silius Italicus' Punica 1 and 2*, in: *Flavian Rome: Culture, image, text*, eds. A. J. Boyle, W. J. Dominik, Leiden 2003, p. 474–480.

⁷⁶ W. J. Dominik, *Rome then and now: Linking the Saguntum and Cannae episodes in Silius Italicus' Punica*, in: *Flavian poetry*, eds. R. R. Nauta, H.-J. van Dam, J. J. L. Smolenaars, Leiden 2006, p. 113–115.

⁷⁷ C. Stocks, *The Roman Hannibal. Remembering the enemy in Silius Italicus' Punica*, Liverpool 2014, p. 106.

As a politically important topos for the Romans, the plight of the inhabitants of Saguntum also became important from the standpoint of later history. The steadfastness of its residents was used as a moral example in Spain during the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. A portrayal of the kind was created by José Ma Pemán, one of the leading intellectuals who supported the regime. As the author of a fictionalised history of Spain (*Historia de España contada con sencillez*), and in keeping with nationalist and ultra-Catholic tenets, he had to explain to his readers the truism that, although suicide is forbidden in Christian doctrine (being one of the gravest sins), it was still a heroic act of courage on the part of the erstwhile people of Saguntum, who did so to defend their dignity. Subsequently, the author would refer to the “Christian Saguntum”, a designation given to a well-known episode of the Spanish Civil War: the siege of the Alcazar in Toledo in 1936.⁷⁸

Conclusions

Saguntum has been included in the pantheon of cities which played an important role in history. Both the siege of the city by Hannibal and the heroic defense of the inhabitants against the Carthaginians were depicted in ancient sources in both a vivid (but also an exaggerated) fashion. The convention of presenting the fate of the besieged city was driven by the ideological goals of Roman writing. The siege and the heroic defense which the inhabitants of Saguntum mounted against the invaders became an integral part of the picture, which showed how the steadfastness of the Romans was greater than that of others. This approach was particularly important in the accounts of Silius Italicus, who significantly added to the heroic theme; as a result, the inhabitants of Saguntum were included among those communities who resisted their enemies despite their exceptional characteristics. The resistance of the inhabitants of Saguntum, faced with the onslaught of Carthaginian invaders, was ultimately insufficient to repel the Punic invaders. Only the Romans emerged victorious from that ordeal. Nevertheless,

⁷⁸ A. Duplá Ansuategui, op. cit., p. 218.

the struggle of the inhabitants of Saguntum was primarily a struggle to save their honour, which became an important element in the understanding of the moral example of the siege. At the same time, it should be stressed that successive generations drew substantial inspiration from such stylised virtue in their search for a heroic epitome of a fight which, albeit doomed to failure, was waged to defend a fundamental value, i.e., honour. Following this analysis, one cannot deny that the authors of later representations did not always have to be familiar with the peculiar nature and diversity of source accounts, and therefore, they sometimes embraced them in a completely uncritical manner, as well as occasionally making up for the deficiencies of their knowledge using their imagination.

An outstanding example of such an ahistorical superstructure may be found in *Ultimo día de Sagundo*, in which Domingo Marqués depicted Hannibal riding a chariot. Perhaps in such a juxtaposition, that military attribute of Middle Eastern provenance may have underscored the metaphorical antagonism between East and West. A further consequence may be found in dangerous xenophobic attitudes, which, based on the analysis of the defence of Saguntum, consisted of exploiting the idea of defending “one’s” land against “foreign” invaders. The example of the heroic defence of Saguntum, deliberately exaggerated in Roman writing, became the mainstay of conservative and patriotic ideals. The myth created by Roman literary circles saw its original function change in later history to highlight the idea of perseverance and heroic defence of a particular nation.

