

# Roman Epic

Epic as Epic

Statius, *Thebaid* Book 7

# Before We Start with Statius...

- Let's remember Lucan...
  - What was he saying again?
- Power corrupts,  
and the pursuit of  
power is always  
destructive



# Discussion

- It's been said that the *Thebaid* isn't really "about" anything. It doesn't center on any history that's particularly Roman, or on a myth of direct relevance to Rome. It's not a national or patriotic epic like the *Aeneid*, but Statius clearly wants it to live on as if it were (at the end of Book 12).
  - We should assume he wouldn't have written it if it wasn't about *something*.
  - The epic is about a war against Thebes, but based on what you read, and based on what other Roman epics we've read, what do you think this epic is really "*about*?"

# The Other Epic Cycle from Old Greece...

- The Theban Cycle
  - Oedipodea
    - Oedipus vs. Sphinx, O. wins; O. marries and has children
  - Thebaid
    - O.'s sons can't share power and war breaks out between respective allies; Seven Against Thebes
  - Epigoni
    - 10 yrs. later the sons of the Seven attack Thebes (ruled by the son of Eteocles)
  - Alcmeonis
    - Alcmeon, son of Amphiaraus, vs. his mother Eriphyle in vengeance for betraying his father





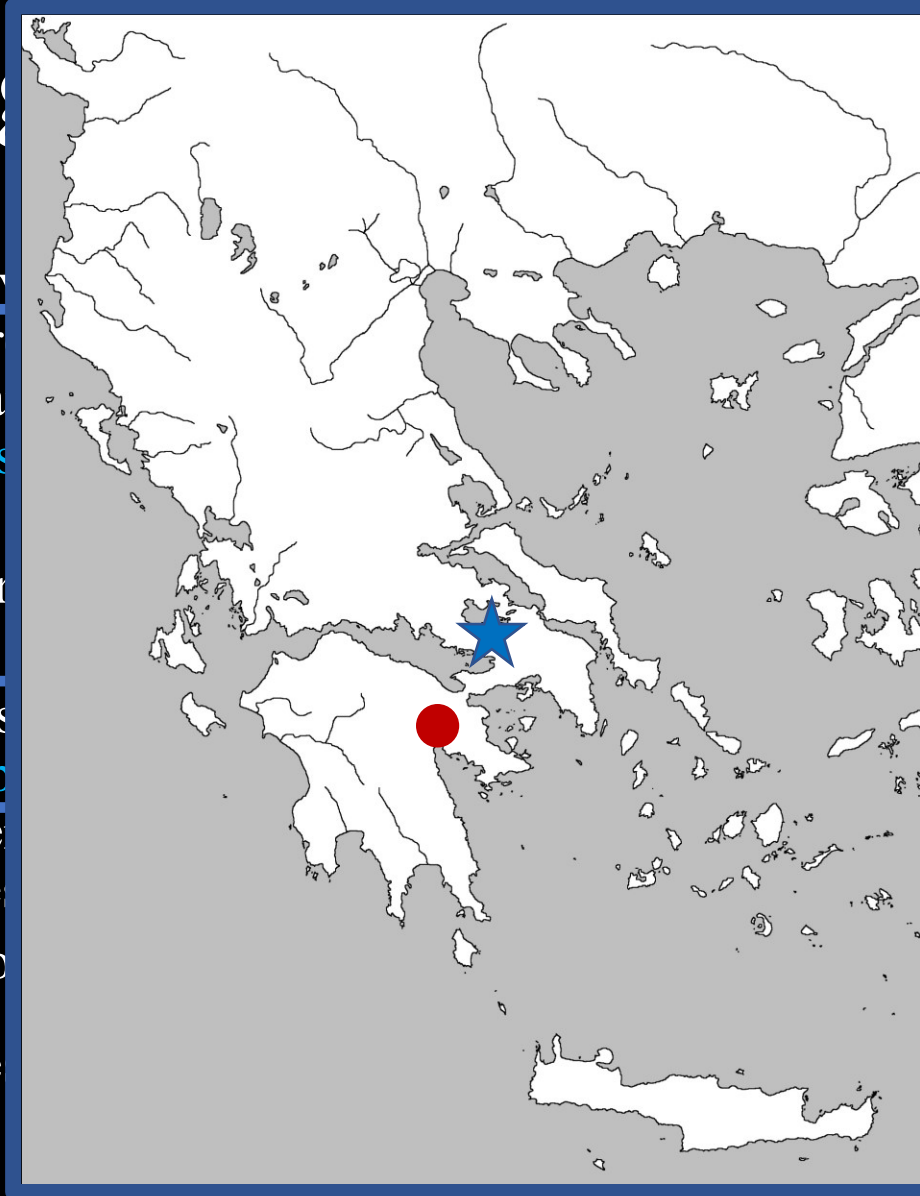
# The Other Epic Cycle from Old Greece...

- The Theban Cycle isn't preserved in epic form:
  - Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (all Athenian) (5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE)
  - Assorted lyric poems (7<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE)
  - Vase paintings and temple sculpture (mostly 6<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE)
  - Mythographers (5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE – 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE)
- Statius (90s c. CE)



# The Seven Against Thebes

- Oedipus has two sons: Polynices and Eteocles
  - Oedipus leaves his throne to Polynices
  - The brothers can't share the throne
  - Jupiter decides Thebes will be ruled by the Argives
- Polynices exiled to Argos, where he meets his future wife
  - Polynices rallies an Argive army to return to Thebes
  - Argive army stops for a festival in Argos
- Argives (with seven heroes) attack Thebes
  - Jocasta tries to make peace
  - Argives fail and all heroes die
  - Polynices and Eteocles kill each other
- Creon, Oedipus' wife's brother, becomes ruler of Thebes (Polynices' uncle)
  - Help sought from Thebes
  - Theseus invades, kills Polynices



## Virgil's *Thebaid*

Starts here

Argives dealing with wicked men

Argives allies  
in Games

Book 7

the Argive dead (including

# Book 7: Narrative

- Jupiter decides things are taking too long, rouses (attention of) Mars
  - Panic and Fear ensue
- Bacchus appeals to Zeus not to destroy his city cruelly
  - Jupiter “agrees”
- Theban allies rally
  - Eteocles’ speech from the wall reminds them of freedom and virtue
  - Epic simile of sheep leaving a pen
- Argives march through bad omens (making bad choices)
- Jocasta faces her son for a “council” of peace
  - Tydeus and Erinyes break it up
- Hasty attack (“in improvised close formations”) marked by blind violence
  - Amphiaraus’ *aristeia* and death

# The Analysis

- The Social Background
  - The gods...
    - Generally not a good thing when the gods take direct notice (3-4)
    - Not all knowing, Mars wasn't paying attention (81 ff.)
    - Mainly expressed as personifications, no real personality
      - Mars is never seen as an anthropomorphic individual but only in the guise of conflict
      - Jupiter is mercurial and prone to violent mood swings and fits of anger or completely calm
      - Bacchus calls Jupiter vicious and uncaring (154 ff.)
      - Affair between Love and War (Venus and Mars)



# The Analysis

- The Narrator's Voice
  - Invocation at the beginning of the battle (628-31)
    - Mirrors Lucan 7.551-5
  - Anachronisms
    - Pikes used “in the Macedonian manner” (269-70)
    - Combination of hide shields (Homeric) and chain mail (310-1)
    - Scythe-wheeled chariot (712)
    - Overlays Roman culture/experience on myth
      - Blurs conceptions of time

# The Analysis

- Language and Performance
  - Very dense and poetic language
    - All ornamental, you don't need to know the mythology he's citing
  - Focused on brief vignettes to drive the narrative like Virgil
    - Often short interjections from unnamed characters to convey emotion (122 ff.)
  - Wants to be seen as Virgil's successor
    - "Outliving your master, will you be read, my Song of Thebes... Fame has eased your way... Live on, I pray! Do not try to surpass the *Aeneid* divine, but... follow..." (*Thebaid* 12.810-7)

# The Analysis

- The Idea of the Hero
  - “Classic” heroic ideals expressed in the Catalogue of Allies (254 ff.)
    - Example: Hypseus armored only on “his chest / for he feels no fear for his back” (311-2)
    - But then the Catalogue is ended by the sheep simile... (390 ff.)
  - Argives march through (disregarding) bad omens (402 ff.)
  - All the heroes end up dying, but none have particularly heroic deaths
    - Amphiaraus swallowed by the earth
    - Tydeus, mortally wounded, eats his killer’s brains
    - Capaneus climbs the walls and challenges Jupiter
    - Polynices and Eteocles kill each other and lie unburied

# The Analysis

- The Literary Background
  - Type-Scenes
    - Councils
      - Bacchus and Zeus (145 ff.) vs. Iliad 1
      - Jocasta-Polynices/Tydeus-Furies (490 ff.)
    - Catalogue of Allies (254 ff.), or is it a Cat. of Enemies?
    - Battle Speech (375 ff.)
    - Aristeia of Amphiaraus (690 ff.)
  - So many other myths...
    - Dense and sometimes hard to follow, but not really necessary to narrative
    - Aetiology of the Nemean Games (94 ff., but mostly in Book 6)

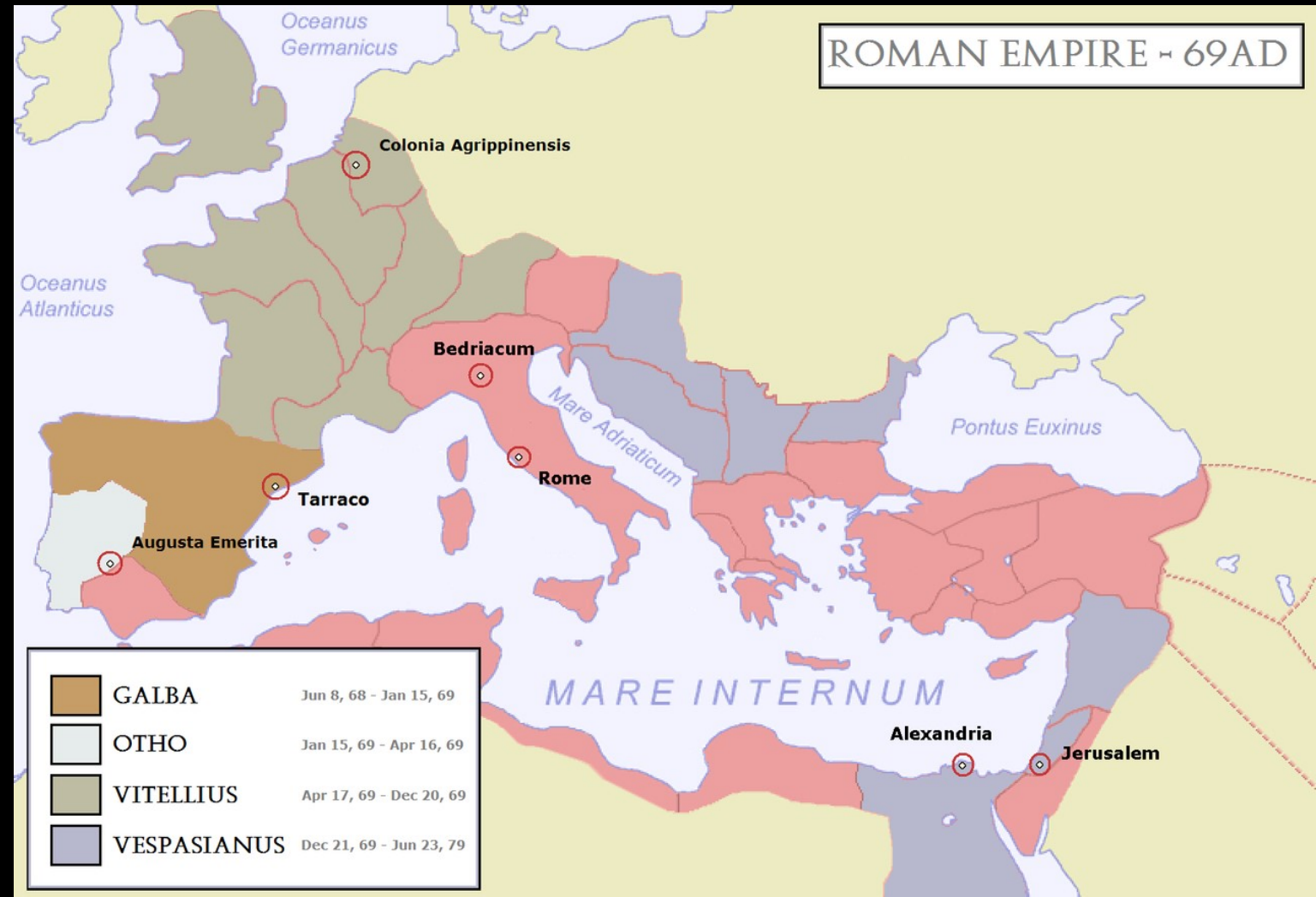
# The Analysis

- The Literary Background
  - Lucan
    - Argives ignoring omens, vs. Caesar ignoring omens in Lucan 1
    - Argives attack “in improvised close formations” inspired by thirst for violence, vs. Caesar’s army doing the same in Lucan 7.329 ff.
    - General theme of brother fighting brother
    - General theme of a futile conflict that can produce nothing good
      - Everyone dies, often unheroically, only sets the stage for more conflict to follow
      - nil actum bello [est] (12.442): “nothing was gained by (this) war” but also “nothing *is* gained by war (in general)”



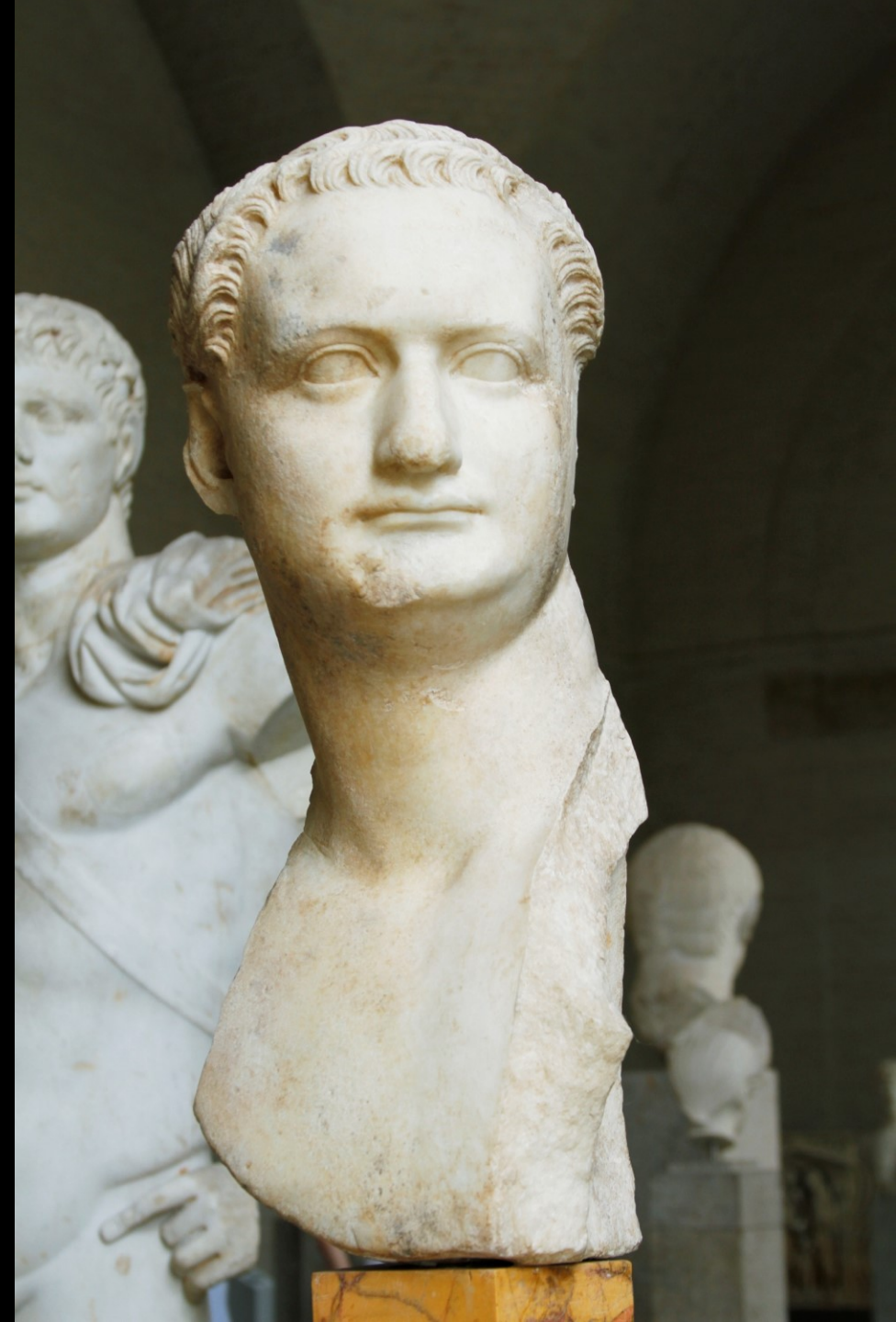
# From Lucan to Statius

- Nero died in 68 CE
  - 69 CE became the Year of the Four Emperors with civil war, but very confined in scale
- Vespasian survived, founded Flavian Dynasty



# The Flavians

- Vespasian (69-79) succeeded by son Titus (79-81), succeeded by brother Domitian (81-96)
  - Domitian never fond of brother
  - Soon showed destructive paranoia and bad judgement with lots of executions
  - Eager to forge his own propaganda
    - “as you take up where your father left off, what Rome / selfishly wants is that you be eternal” (Statius, *Thebaid* 1.23-4)
      - Where’s Titus?
      - Plausible deniability?



# From Lucan to Statius in Theme

- Savage in-fighting (69 CE) stopped only by the appearance of a Theseus (Vespasian), but this led only to atrocities and more violence (Domitian)
  - “Brothers crossing swords... their kingdom vied for in fiendish hatred... these (things) my mind... burns to unfold” (*Thebaid* 1.1-3)
- In Lucan and Statius, power is always destructive
  - Gods barely act, but when they do it’s always destructive and violent (everyone loses)
  - Kings amount to nothing, everyone’s motivations end in death regardless of intent
  - No role for wisdom or calming voices to avert disasters that everyone sees coming—no one can claim moral highground
  - *Thebaid* is fairly fatalistic