SILEX. See **Flint.**

SILICEOUS earths. See Mineralogy, Part II. Order 4.

SILIUS (Italicus Caius), an ancient Roman poet, and author of an epic poem in 17 books, which con­tains an hiſtory of the ſecond Punic war, ſo famous for having decided the empire of the world in favour of the Romans. He was born in the reign of Tiberius, and is ſuppoſed to have derived the name of *Italicus* from the place of his birth ; but whether he was born at Ita­lica in Spain, or at Corfinium in Italy, which, accord­ing to Strabo, had the name of *Italica* given it during the Social war, is a point which cannot be known : though, if his birth had happened at either oſ theſe places, the grammarians would tell us, that he ſhould have been called *Itallcenſis,* and not *Italicus.* When he came to Rome, he applied himſelf to the bar ; and, by a cloſe imitation of Cicero, ſucceeded ſo well, that he became a celebrated advocate and moſt accompliſhed orator. His merit and character recommended him to the high­est offices in the republic, even to the conſulſhip, of which he was poſſessed when Nero died. He is said to have been aiding and aſſiſting in accuſing perſons of high rank and fortune, whom that wicked emperor had devoted to deſtruction : but he retrieved his character afterwards by a long and uniform courſe of virtuous be­haviour. Veſpafian ſent him as proconſul into Asia, where he behaved with clean hands and unblemiſhed re­putation. After having thus ſpent the beſt part of his life in the ſervice of his country, he bade adieu to public affairs, resolving to conſecrate the remainder to polite retirement and the muſes. He had ſeveral fine villas in the country : one at Tuſeulum, celebrated for having been Cicero’s ; and a farm near Naples ſaid to have been Virgil’s, at which was his tomb, which Silius often visited. Thus Martial compliments him on both theſe accounts .:

*Silius haec magni celebrat monumenta Maronis,*

*jugera jucundi qui Ciceronis habet,*

*Haeredem Dominumque sui tumulique lariſque*

*Non alium mallet nec Maro nec Cicero.*

Epigr. 49. lib. xi.

Of Tully’s seat my Silius is possess'd,

And his the tomb where Virgil’s aſhes reſt.

Could thoſe great ſhades return to chooſe their heir,

The preſent owner they would both prefer.

In theſe retirements he applied himſelf to poetry : led not ſo much by any great force of genius, which would certainly not have ſuffered him to ſtay till life was in the wane and his imagination growing cold, as by his exceeding great love of Virgil, to whoſe memory Ire paid the higheſt veneration. He has imitated hint in his poem ; and though he falls infinitely ſhort of him, yet he has diſcovered a great and univerſal genius, which would have enabled him to ſucceed in ſome degree in whatever he undertook.

Having been for ſome time afflicted with an impoſthume, which was deemed incurable, he grew weary of life, to which, in the language of Pliny, he put an end with determined courage.

There have been many editions of Silius Italicus. A neat and correct one was publiſhed at Leipsic in 1696,in 8vo, with ſhort and uſeful notes by Cellarius: but the

beſt is that c*um rotis integris variorum et Arnοldi Drakenborch.* Traject. ad Rhen. 1717, in 4to.

SILK, a very ſoft, fine, bright thread, the work of an infect called *bombyx,* or the ſilk worm.

As the silk worm is a native of China, the culture of ſilk in ancient times was entirely confined to that coun­try. We are told that the empresſes, ſurrounded by their women, ſpent their leiſure hours in hatching and rearing silk worms, and in weaving tiffues and silk veils. That this example was ſoon imitated by perſons of all ranks, we have reason to conclude ; for we are informed that the Chineſe, who were formerly clothed in ſkins, in a ſhort time after were dressed in veſtments of silk. Till the reign of Juſtinian, the ſilk worm was unknown beyond the territories of China, but ſilk was introduced into Perſia long before that period. After the conqueſt of the Perſiaſn empire by Alexander the Great, this va­luable commodity was brought into Greece, and thence conveyed to Rome. The firſt of the Roman writers extant by whom ſilk is mentioned, are Virgil and Ho­race ; but it is probable that neither of them knew from what country it was obtained, nor how it was produced. By ſome of the ancients it was ſuppoſed to be a fine down adhering to the leaves of certain trees or flowers. Others imagined it to be a delicate ſpecies of wool or cotton ; and even thoſe who had learned that it was the work of an infect, ſhow by their deſcriptions that they had no diſtinct idea of the manner in which it was formed. Among the Romans, ſilk was deemed a dreſs too expensive and too delicate for men, and was appropriated wholly to women of eminent rank and opu­lence. Elagabulus is ſaid to have been the firſt man among the Romans who wore a garment of fine ſilk: Aurelian complained that a pound of ſilk was fold at Rome for 12 ounces of gold ; and it is ſaid he refuſed to give his wife permiſſion to wear it on account of its exorbitant price.

For ſeveral centuries the Perſians ſupplied the Ro­man empire with the ſilks of China. Caravans tra­versed the whole latitude of Alia, in 243 days, from the Chineſe ocean to the ſea-coaſt of Syria, carrying this commodity. Sometimes it was conveyed to the ports of Guzerat and Malabar, and thence transported by ſea to the Perſian Gulph. The Perſians, with the uſual rapacity of monopoliſts, raiſed the price of ſilk to ſuch an exorbitant height, that Juſtinian, eager not only to obtain a full and certain ſupply of a commodity which was become of indiſpenſable uſe, but ſolicitous to deliver the commerce of his ſubjects from the exactions of his enemies, endeavoured, by means oſ his ally, the Chriſ­tian monarch of Abyſſinia, to wreſt ſome portion of the ſilk trade from the Perſians. In this attempt he failed ; but when he leaſt expected it, he, by an unforeſeen event, attained, in ſome meaſure, the object which he had in view. Two Perſian monks having been em­ployed as miſſionaries in ſome of the Chriſtian churches, which were eſtabliſhed (as we are informed by Coſmas) in different parts of India, had penetrated into the coun­try of the Seres,, or China. There they obſerved the labours of the ſilk worm, and became acquainted with all the arts of man in working up its productions into ſuch a variety of elegant fabrics. The proſpect of gain, or perhaps an indignant zeal, excited by ſeeing this lu­crative branch oſ commerce engroſſed by unbelieving