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Building in words : representations of the process of construction in Latin literature

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Chapter V

Walls of Song: The Myth of Amphion

1. Introduction

The myth of the Theban hero Amphion presents a narrative version of the architectural metaphor considered in the previous two chapters. Amphion erects the walls of the city of Thebes not through physical strength but by means of his lyre. His song is so powerful that it transports and lifts up the building blocks and forms them into the famous seven-gated city walls of Thebes. The metaphor of the ἐπέων τέκτων is realised in the myth of Amphion:¹ in composing his song he is not only *like* a builder, he really *is* a builder.

The numerous versions of the myth are underpinned by a number of unifying themes. Most importantly for our investigation, the myth tells a story about the power of poetry, the power of song to impact on reality. At the same time, Amphion's double role as a poet and as the founder of Thebes forges a close connection between the spheres of poetry and of civilisation. The ordering and harmonising power of music and song are linked to the provision of a safe and ordered human existence of city-dwelling. Amphion's counterpart in the myth, his active warrior-brother Zethus, serves to align Amphion more securely with peace, order and harmony.

The previous chapters explored how the building metaphor offers poets a means of presenting their views about poetry. The story of the magical construction of Thebes provides similar opportunities for poetic self-reflection. Poets' choices and strategies in representing the myth of Amphion can impact on the way in which we read their own poetry.

¹ On this phrase, see above, p. 104, n. 3.

2. Amphion in Greece

The myth of Amphion is first attested in the seventh century, in the *Odyssey* and in Hesiod.² In both sources, Amphion is mentioned as having built the walls of Thebes together with his brother Zethus.³ Neither author distinguishes between the contributions of the two brothers, and only Hesiod appears to mention the element of musical magic.⁴ Fragments from sixth- and fifth-century authors seem to suggest an increasing distinction between the respective contributions of Amphion and Zethus.⁵ The first extensive treatment of the myth preserved in any detail appears in a fragmentary play by Euripides, the *Antiope*.⁶ In this play, the brothers are portrayed as exponents of diametrically opposed ways of life. Zethus is a brawny hunter and warrior, a man of action, while Amphion prefers to dedicate his life to song and his lyre, to contemplation and to σοφία.⁷ The play contained a famous *agon* in which the brothers argued for their respective positions.⁸ We do not know who won the debate,⁹ but in any case Amphion's

² Hom. *Od.* 11.260-5 and Hes. fr. 182 M.-W. For other versions of the myth in Greek sources, see Eumelos fr. 13 Bernabé, Minyas fr. 3 Bernabé, Eur. *Antiope*. (for which see also Pl. *Grg.* 485e-486c), Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 1.736-41, Dio Chrys. *Or.* 32.62, [Apollod.] *Bibl.* 3.5.5, Paus. 9.5.7-8, Lucian *Im.* 14, Philostr. *Imag.* 1.10; see also Lycoph. *Alex.* 604, where Zethus alone is evoked, since he symbolises building through hard work as opposed to musical miracles. Hurst (2000) usefully collects much of the material; see also Olivieri (2011), 24-7 on the myth of Amphion and Zethus before Pindar.

³ Berman (2004) argues that the story of Amphion and Zethus was actually a foundation myth of Thebes which initially coexisted (and competed) with the myth of Cadmus and the earthborn warriors, and that later mythographers attempted to reconcile them by imposing a chronological order: first foundation (Cadmus), then wall building (Amphion and Zethus). Olivieri (2011), ch. 1, analyses Pindar's negotiation of the 'double foundation'.

⁴ Hurst (2000), 65-6.

⁵ See Eumelos fr. 13 Bernabé, Minyas fr. 3 Bernabé, with Hurst (2000), 66-7.

⁶ The fragments of the *Antiope* (ca. 50 in total) are edited by Kambitsis (1972) with a detailed commentary; see also the editions (with translation) of Jouan/van Looy (1998) and Collard/Cropp/Gilbert (2004), the latter with selected bibliography (259) and a useful commentary. I use Collard's text in Collard/Cropp/Gilbert (2004) unless otherwise noted, as well as his line-numbers (Kannicht's *TrGF* line numbers are supplied in brackets). Translations are also adapted from Collard/Cropp/Gilbert (2004). See Snell (1971), ch. 3, for a readable introduction, reconstruction of the plot and reflection on the main (philosophical) themes of the play.

⁷ On σοφία in the *Antiope*, see Stieber (2011), 423-5.

⁸ See fr. 183-8, 219, 189, 191, 193-4, 196-202, 220 (in Kannicht's *TrGF* numbering used also by Collard/Cropp/Gilbert (2004)). On the main themes of the debate and possible interpretations of the two positions in the light of contemporary philosophy, see Collard/Cropp/Gilbert (2004), 266-8, with bibliography. Four passages of this debate are quoted by Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias* when he attempts to argue against excessive philosophising by adopting the role of

position is given divine sanction at the end of the play. There, Hermes appears as *deus ex machina* and orders Zethus and Amphion to build walls for the city of Thebes (fr. 223.90-7 (119-26 TrGF)):¹⁰

δεύτερον δ' Ἀμφίονα λύραν ἄ[νωγ]α διὰ χειρῶν ὠπλισμένον μέλπειν θεοῦ[ς ὦ]δαῖσιν ἔψονται δέ σοι πέτραι τ' [ἐ]ρυσιναι μουσικῇ κηλούμεναι δένδρῳ τε μητροῦς ἐκλιπόνθ' ἐδώλια, ὥστ' εὐμ[ά]ρειαν τεκτόνων θήσει χειρί. Ζεὺς τήνδε τιμὴν σὺν δ' ἐγὼ δίδωμι σοι, οὐπερ τόδ' εὖρημ' ἔσχες, Ἀμφίων ἄναξ.	90 (119) 95 (124)
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Next, I bid Amphion arm himself with lyre in hand and sing of the gods with songs; bewitched by your music, solid rocks will follow you and trees leave their seat in mother earth, so they will make light work for the builders' hands.¹¹ Zeus gives you this honour, and I with him, from whom you had this invention, lord Amphion.

The power of poetry and song is triumphantly confirmed by Hermes' prediction. The song Amphion sang earlier in the play dealt with heaven and earth which make up the cosmos (fr. 182a).¹² The honourable task given to him and his lyre confirm the power of music over the subjects of his song, the power to order and civilise and to create things just as useful as what can be made by hand. Where Zethus had urged Amphion to abandon his lyre for arms, Hermes now orders him to arm himself (ὠπλισμένον) with his lyre.¹³

Zethus (485e-486a). On Amphion and Zethus in the *Gorgias*, see Dodds (1959), 275-9, and Nightingale (1992).

⁹ For the arguments for Zethus' victory (dramatic considerations and Horace's remark at *Epist.* 1.18), see Snell (1971), 97. On Hor. *Epist.* 1.18 see p. 181 below. Others believe that Amphion won and that Hermes gave divine approval to his victory (see e.g. Collard, 266-7, in Collard/Cropp/Gilbert (2004)).

¹⁰ This passage is mostly preserved on a papyrus (P.Petrie 1-2) which contains about 120 lines of the play and was recovered in 1891. See further Diggle (1996) with full bibliography.

¹¹ Θήσει is the reading of the papyrus, with δένδρῳ as subject. Collard, following Diggle, reads θήσῃ (2nd singular future middle), the subject being Amphion.

¹² Snell (1971) believes that this was a cosmogonic hymn presenting 'eine Lehre von den Elementen' (87) and 'hohe Philosophie' (88), but on the basis of one (relatively generic) fragment, this has to remain speculation: see Collard/Cropp/Gilbert (2004), 299, *ad loc.*

¹³ As far as we can judge on the basis of the fragmentary transmission, Amphion's achievement in the *Antiope* consists of transporting the stones to the building site. His song does not in itself accomplish the formation of stones into the wall, since workmen (τέκτονες) are still needed

In Apollonius' *Argonautica*, Amphion and Zethus and the walls of Thebes feature as one of the seven scenes described in the ecphrasis of Jason's cloak (1.735-41):¹⁴

Ἐν δ' ἔσαν Ἀντιόπης Ἀσωπίδος υἱέε δοιῶ, 735
 Ἀμφίων καὶ Ζῆθος, ἀπύργωτος δ' ἔτι Θήβη
 κεῖτο πέλας· τῆς οὔγε νέον βάλλοντο δομαίους
 ἱέμενοι· Ζῆθος μὲν ἐπωμαδὸν ἤερταζεν
 οὖρεος ἡλιβάτοιο κάρη, μογέοντι ἐοικώς·
 Ἀμφίων δ' ἐπὶ οἷ χροσέῃ φόρμιγγι λιγαίνων 740
 ῥιε, δις τόσση δὲ μετ' ἔχνια νίσσεται πέτρῃ.

And on it were the twin sons of Antiope, Asopus' daughter, Amphion and Zethus. Nearby was Thebes, still without towers, whose foundation stones they were just now laying with great zeal. Zethus was carrying the top of a high mountain on his shoulders, like a man toiling hard, but after him came Amphion, playing loudly on his golden lyre, and a boulder twice as big followed in his footsteps.

The meaning of the scenes on the cloak of Jason is the subject of a continuing debate, since it is extremely difficult to find a theme connecting all seven of them or to link them all to the narrative of the epic.¹⁵ One connection between the image of Amphion and Zethus and the narrative at least seems secure. The theme of the power of song and the superiority of song over physical strength, exemplified by the larger-size boulder that Amphion moves, is present in the main narrative in the person of Orpheus, the singer among the Argonauts. Orpheus is first introduced into the narrative, just after the invocation of the Muses, as the

(although the phrasing may be taken to imply that his music also rendered the lifting into position of the building materials an easier task). Apollonius' brief mention also only concerns the transportation of stones. The earliest definite mention of Amphion's power to form stones into a wall by means of his lyre comes, as far as I can tell, only in Prop. 3.2 (see n. 25 below). The state of transmission of the *Antiope*, as well as the potential loss of numerous versions of the myth, should, however, prevent us from drawing any conclusions about Roman (or Propertian) innovation on this point.

¹⁴ The translation is taken from Race (2008).

¹⁵ An eccentric reading is proposed by Shapiro (1980), who argues that the description has no relation to the narrative but rather represents different techniques of (actual) Hellenistic art. Lawall (1966) has famously argued for reading the cloak as a 'didactic' present from Athena, designed to teach the 'anti-hero' Jason how to act in different situations. Merriam (1993) tries to tie the cloak to the important theme of cooperation between different kinds of forces in the epic (on Amphion and Zethus see 75-6). Hunter (1993) has a more open reading of the cloak in general, drawing out suggestive interactions with Homeric and other models and suggesting that 'the cloak ... presents scenes which are partial analogues of elements of the epic, with correspondences which are both oblique and polyvalent' (58).

first Argonaut in the catalogue (1.27-31). He is described as moving stones, rivers and trees through his song; here is the magical power of song over nature animate and inanimate which is picked up in the Amphion-scene.¹⁶ The contest between Amphion's song and Zethus' physical strength parallels the contest between Orpheus' musical magic and the more traditional warrior skills of other Argonauts, such as Idas and Heracles.¹⁷

I also tentatively add a suggestion of my own to the many possible (and in most cases complementary) readings of the cloak as a whole that have been suggested. It appears that the first three scenes, combined with the introduction of the cloak as the handiwork of Athena and a work of skill and craft to match the design of the Argo (1.721-9), offer a series of reflections on how art and artfully-made objects come into being – a theme not out of place in an ecphrasis, the *locus classicus* of poetic and artistic self-reflection. In the first scene of the cloak (1.730-4), the Cyclopes are shown as forging a thunderbolt (with an echo of the shield of Achilles, which is famously being made as it is described).¹⁸ Their work is unending (ἀφθίτω ... ἔργω) and is accomplished through perseverance and skill as well as hard physical labour (προνεύμενοι). In the second scene, Amphion and Zethus (like the Cyclopes) cooperate in building the walls of Thebes, but their advantages of hard work and artistic inspiration are weighed against each other. While hard work is necessary, and Zethus' contribution is by no means worthless, Amphion's divine musical talent makes the more important contribution to their joint project.¹⁹ Finally, their scene is followed by a depiction of Aphrodite studying her reflection in the shield of Ares. Perfect likeness is here achieved through an exact replication of reality, with neither skill nor hard work involved – but the ontological status of a mere reflection remains in doubt.²⁰ If such a reading of (part of) the ecphrasis of

¹⁶ On Orpheus in the *Argonautica* see Klooster (2011), 75-7 and 82-91. Cf. Fränkel (1968), 102, on the motif of the 'Zauber Macht der Lieder'.

¹⁷ Merriam (1993), 75-6, Hunter (1993), 58, and Clauss (1993), 124, who likewise sees the contrast between Amphion's skill and Zethus' strength as recalling the contrast between Orpheus and Heracles in the catalogue at the beginning of book 1 and compares to this the sixth scene of the cloak (759-62), also a contest of strength versus skill.

¹⁸ Cf. also Hunter (1993), 54, who reads the 'work in progress' of the Cyclopes and Amphion as highlighting the difference between Apollonius' ecphrasis of the 'finished' cloak and the making of the Homeric shield.

¹⁹ Merriam (1993) also stresses that Zethus' part in the work is necessary and goes on to develop the theme of cooperation in the different scenes.

²⁰ Cf. Pl. *Resp.* 10.596d-e, where Socrates suggests that by carrying a mirror one could 'make' sun, sky, earth, oneself and everything else, and that a painter produces the same kind of

Jason's cloak is accepted, then the wall-building of Amphion and Zethus can be read as a reflection on the respective contributions of zeal and (divinely inspired) talent to the production of art (and poetry?).

In the versions of both Euripides and Apollonius, the myth of Amphion tells of the power of poetry to alter reality, to accomplish magical feats that simple physical effort cannot accomplish. In Euripides, Amphion appears as a city-founder, and both authors stress Amphion's peaceful, harmonising force, which contrasts with the efforts of warrior Zethus, as does the power of Orpheus with the Argonautic warriors. However, any potential parallels between the power of Amphion's song and the power of the poetry in which his story is told remain, if they are present at all, implicit. In Roman poetry, this parallel and its implications are exploited to a much greater extent.

3. Amphion in Rome

Amphion's appearances in Latin literature are relatively few. I first give an overview of the themes and contexts of these passages in order to sketch the necessary background for my analysis of Statius' treatment of the Amphion myth in his *Thebaid*.

Amphion sometimes appears in Latin poetry simply as a figure of Theban mythology, without (or almost without) reference to his wall-building magic. Propertius' elegy 3.15, for example, tells the story of the punishment of Dirce by Amphion and his brother Zethus.²¹ In the Theban narrative of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Amphion features as the husband of the unhappy Niobe (*Met.*

representation. Hunter (1993), 55, also reads this scene as artistically self-referential, but in terms of reception, not production. He argues that Apollonius uses the Aphrodite-scene to 'suggest ways of reading his own text ... as the goddess is reflected in the shield, so we examine the shield of Homer and find reflections in our text'.

²¹ Although the musical foundation of Thebes is not mentioned directly, Amphion's role as the 'poetic' brother is alluded to when he sings a paean of victory at Dirce's death (3.15.42). See Rutherford/Naiden (1996) who suggest that this paean has sinister associations and points forward to Amphion's death and the killing of the Niobids.

3.178-9, 221, 271, 402), and he is also referred to in this capacity in Juvenal's sixth satire (169-72).²²

Far more frequently, however, Amphion appears on account of his magical wall-building, quickly developing into a classic (or even clichéd) *exemplum* of the power of poetry. Most commonly, he forms part of a line-up of famous mythical poets alongside the more famous Orpheus and some other poet (often Arion). The heroes' mythical feats of taming beasts, moving plants and rocks are employed to illustrate the power of song and poetry and its impact on the world outside it.²³ For example, Ovid in the third book of the *Ars Amatoria* suggests that women should learn to sing, since song has an alluring power (3.315): *res est blanda canor: discant cantare puellae* – 'Song is a seductive thing – let girls learn to sing!' He illustrates this with a line-up of mythical singers, headed by the Sirens (3.311-14, a deliciously immoral model for female readers), followed by Orpheus, Amphion and Arion (3.321-6), all of whom had the gift of especially powerful or magical song.²⁴ Similar groups of famous mythical poets are used to illustrate the power of song in Propertius 3.2.3-8 (Orpheus, Amphion, Polyphemus) and in Silius Italicus' *Punica* 11.440-82, where the bard Teuthras sings a song about the power of the lyre (Amphion, Arion, Cheiron, Orpheus).²⁵ Whatever the composition of these groups

²² In Ovid's Niobe episode, the poetic foundation is referred to fleetingly, as one of the things of which Niobe fatally boasts (3.178-9). Much useful material on this dark side of the Amphion myth is collected by Rutherford/Naiden (1996).

²³ In an epitaph for an architect from Hermoupolis Magna (Donderer A8 with commentary), Amphion and Orpheus also appear as a pair. There, however, they illustrate not the power of poetry but the almost supernatural powers of the deceased architect, who was able to move and lift columns and heavy blocks of stone just as easily as the mythical singers.

²⁴ Implicit is the suggestion that not only the women's song, but also the song of love elegy has magically persuasive powers. This concept of persuasive song is a key theme of love elegy – see especially Stroh (1971). Ovid also plays on the fact that *carmen* can not only mean song but also magical incantation in Latin. On the double meaning of *carmen* and the *topos* of magic as an image of the poet's art, see also Ov. *Am.* 2.2.23-8 with Reitzenstein (1935), 79, Wimmel (1960), 304-5 and Booth (1991), 103, Verg. *Ecl.* 8.64-109 with Luck (1985), 77, and Erichtho in Lucan's *Bellum Civile* with Masters (1992), 206-7.

²⁵ In Prop. 3.2.5-6, Amphion is clearly described not only as moving building blocks to the site but actually as magicking them into position: *saxa Cithaeronis Thebas agitata per artem / sponte sua in muri membra coisse ferunt*. – 'They say that the rocks of Cithairon, moved to Thebes by the art [of Amphion], spontaneously came together to form the parts of the wall'. See also note n. 13 above on Amphion's transport vs. construction miracle. Fantham (1997), 124, reads the architectural metaphors in Prop. 4.1 (on which see 118-25 in ch. 3 above) as a backward look to Amphion in the earlier elegies: 'Propertius sees himself as another Amphion, the poet architect first mentioned in the second Ponticus elegy ... then cited with Orpheus as a model for Propertius' creative power in 3.2.5-6.' On Teuthras' song and the role of Amphion in it, see

of mythical poets, Amphion and Orpheus are always among them. Perhaps they are coupled so often because their mythical feats ideally complement each other: while Orpheus sings to wild beasts and trees, Amphion's magic works on inanimate stones.²⁶ In Horace's *Odes* 3.11, however, Amphion is exceptionally invoked as a poetic *exemplum* in his own right. The speaker calls on Mercury to help with his song, using the god's gift of Amphion's magical powers as an argument for now obtaining the same favour: *nam te docilis magistro / movit Amphion lapides canendo* – '... for with you as master, docile Amphion moved stones by singing' (3.11.1-2).²⁷

Horace draws the most explicit connection between Amphion's poetic feat and his role as a founder and bringer of civilisation. In a narrative of *Kulturentstehung* in his *Ars Poetica*, the myth of Amphion (again coupled with that of Orpheus) is interpreted as an allegory of the development of civilisation (Hor. *Ars P.* 391-401):

silvestris homines sacer interpresque deorum	391
caedibus et victu foedo deterruit Orpheus,	
dictus ob hoc lenire tigres rabidosque leones;	
dictus et Amphion, Thebaeae conditor urbis,	
saxa movere sono testudinis et prece blanda	395
ducere quo vellet. fuit haec sapientia quondam,	
publica privatis secernere, sacra profanis,	
concubitu prohibere vago, dare iura maritis,	
oppida moliri, leges incidere ligno.	
sic honor et nomen divinis vatibus atque	400
carminibus venit.	

Orpheus, priest and interpreter of the gods, kept men, who were then still living in the woods, from murder and cannibalism; hence he was said to have tamed rabid tigers and lions. It is also said that Amphion, the founder of the city of Thebes, moved stones by the sound of his lyre and led them by alluring persuasion where he wanted. This, once, was wisdom, to divide public from private affairs and the sacred from the profane, to prohibit random intercourse, to lay down laws for

Deremetz (1995), 419-20, Jourdan (2008), 111-15, Marks (2010), 192. Incidentally, Amphion himself seems to have sung a song about the lyre (and its development) in the Euripidean *Antiope* (fr. 190 Collard/*TrGF*) and the Pacuvian *Antiope* (fr. 3 Schierl).

²⁶ This division is not always maintained: for example, in *Silv.* 3.1.16-17, the walls that have been constructed with magical speed are suspected to be the work of either Orpheus or Amphion (see p. 141-2 in ch. 4 above).

²⁷ Amphion's wall-building is also referred to in a half-sentence in *Ov. Am.* 3.12.40, in a long list of myths which Ovid introduces to illustrate the 'untruthfulness' of poets.

married couples, to toil at cities, and to carve laws into wood. In such a way honour and renown came to the holy bards and their songs.

Horace argues that poets and poetry served as catalysts for the development of civilisation. Stories about the taming of wild beasts (Orpheus) and the building of a city by song (Amphion) developed, he argues, as a reflection of this civilising influence of poetry – poetry and the wisdom of the inspired *vates* moved humans to stop behaving like wild beasts, move to cities and live peacefully together.²⁸

Amphion's characterisation as a peaceful and harmonising force is complemented by that of his brother Zethus as a warrior and man of action. The brothers' debate about their respective life choices, well-known from Euripides' *Antiope*, also appears in the Pacuvian play of the same title, which is in turn referred to by Cicero and the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*.²⁹ The debate also features in Horace's first book of *Epistles*. There, the addressee (Lollius) is advised to gain the favour of his patron by yielding to the latter's interests, just as Amphion did to Zethus, and to leave poetry behind to join the patron's hunt (*Epist.* 1.18.39-43). The irony of using this particular mythical illustration is that Amphion's life choice, and not that of Zethus, eventually wins through in the myth and that furthermore, this sage advice is transmitted through the medium of poetry. The brothers also appear in Seneca's *Oedipus* 609-12, rising together from the underworld, again embodying the peaceful and the violent aspects of Theban foundation respectively: Zethus emerges *ferocem ... taurum premens* – 'restraining the wild bull', (610) while Amphion is carrying the lyre that moves stones *dulci ... sono* 'with sweet sound' (612).³⁰

²⁸ The list of ancient famous poets then continues with Homer and Tyrtæus. For this passage see the analysis of Jourdan (2008), 104-11, especially on the link between civilisation and the power of the poet. See also Kießling/Heinze (1959), 354-5 *ad* 391 on the (Stoic?) tradition of this allegorical reading, and Brink (1971), 388 *ad* 394 on Amphion as a civilising poet (and possibly founder of Thebes). Lovatt (2007), 148-9 discusses this passage and the poet's political role.

²⁹ Cic. *Inv. rhet.* 1.94; *Rhet. Her.* 2.43: the debate is referred to in order to illustrate a particular weakness of argumentation of which Amphion is apparently guilty. For the fragments of Pacuvius' *Antiope*, see Schierl (2006), 91-130 (also with a collection of testimonies for the Pacuvian tragedy, 104-5). See also Manuwald (2003), 95-7 on Pacuvius' treatment of the debate.

³⁰ See Segal (1983), 231: 'The pairing of Zethus and Amphion anticipates the ambiguous truth concealed beneath Oedipus' kingship: a murderous violence beneath the civilising act of killing the Sphinx (cf. 640f.). Oedipus holds in himself the potential of both Zethus and Amphion.'

Amphion has thus become a standard *exemplum* for the power of poetry as well as a bringer of peace and civilisation. However, where Amphion's roles as poet and as founder of the Theban walls are combined, the picture is complicated by the eventual fate of Amphion's city of Thebes and its walls. In two Theban plays, Seneca exploits the contrast between the walls' magical foundation and their (impending) destruction. In the *Hercules Furens*, Amphitryon (Hercules' foster father and husband of Alcmene) laments the present suffering of Thebes. Since Heracles has left to accomplish a labour in the underworld, the tyrant Lycus has usurped power. Amphitryon contrasts Thebes' sorry state with the great past of the city (*Her. F.* 258-63):³¹

... quis satis Thebas fleat?	258
ferax deorum terra, quem dominum tremi!	
e cuius arvis eque fecundo sinu	260
stricto iuventus orta cum ferro stetit	
cuiusque muros natus Amphion Iove	
struxit canoro saxa modulatu trahens, ...	

Who could weep enough for Thebes? What a master that god-bearing land fears! She from whose fields and fertile bosom warriors arose and stood ready with drawn swords, she whose walls Jove's son Amphion built, shifting the stones with his resonant music ...

Amphion's magical wall-building is numbered among the great achievements of Thebes – all the worse and all the more incomprehensible that the city has now been brought so low.³² In Seneca's *Phoenissae*, the walls feature in a similar context. Iocasta has intervened on the battlefield and in a long speech tries to dissuade her sons Eteocles and Polynices from fighting each other. Here she is asking Polynices to desist from attacking his home, the city of Thebes (*Phoen.* 565-71):

... haec telis petes	565
flamisque tecta? poteris has Amphionis	
quassare moles? nulla quas struxit manus	
stridente tardum machina ducens onus,	
sed convocatus vocis et citharae sono	

³¹ Translations of Seneca's plays are taken from Fitch (2002-4).

³² On this passage see also Segal (1983), 233-4, who stresses the peaceful and harmonious associations of Amphion in contrast to the violent (dramatic) present. Segal also points to the conspicuous absence of peaceful Amphion from Hercules' invocation of the founders of Thebes when his madness begins to take hold. He only refers to warlike Zethus (*Her. F.* 915-16).

per se ipse summas venit in turre lapis;
haec saxa franges?

570

Will you attack these buildings with weapons and flames? Will you be able to shake these bastions of Amphion? No hands built them by moving ponderous masses on creaking machinery; the stones were mustered by the sound of his voice and lyre, and rose by themselves to the tops of the towers. Will you smash these rocks?

Iocasta uses the origin of the walls as an argument in her attempt to convince her son to spare the city. She suggests both that the destruction of such walls may be beyond Polynices' power (*poteris*, 566) but also that the walls should somehow be respected, since no human hand, no creaking crane, but song and the lyre lifted the stones into position.³³ Of course, Iocasta's arguments are of no avail – the point is precisely that Polynices does *not* respect the special status of these walls, and that their magical-poetic origin is *not* good enough to render them immune to the Seven's assault.³⁴ In Seneca's plays, therefore, Amphion symbolises not so much the power as the (eventual) *powerlessness* of poetry. Although the building of the walls was a powerful act of poetic magic, this magic cannot protect them now that the city is threatened. Furthermore, while the founder-hero Amphion is 'a reminder of civilising order in Thebes' past', these passages, by showing the ineffectiveness of his magic in the present, develop a 'larger contrast between the civilising art of song and the destructive savagery of war'.³⁵

In Roman literature, Amphion has developed into an illustration of the power of poetry and its peaceful and civilising force. Often, he is mentioned without any reference to the city of Thebes at all. Seneca's Theban plays, however, problematise the contrast between the magical-poetic construction of the Theban walls and their fate of destruction. This contrast also forms the catalyst for Statius' treatment of Amphion in his *Thebaid*.

³³ For the contrast between the ugly sound of the crane and the melodious sound of song and lyre, cf. Statius' use of the noise of the building site, discussed in ch. 4, p. 155-61, above.

³⁴ Segal (1983), 230, points out that civilising hero Amphion serves as a foil for Polynices. Barchiesi (1988), 126, suggests that the reference to Amphion may be a nod towards the harmonious joint reign of the brothers Amphion and Zethus, in contrast to that of Polynices and Eteocles.

³⁵ Segal (1983), 230-1.

4. *chelys Thebais*: Statius and Amphion

In the previous chapter, I analysed the use that Statius makes of the building metaphor in some of his *Silvae*. The special interest in the metaphorical potential of construction also leads to a special interest in the myth of Amphion. In *Silvae* 2.2 and 3.1, two poems about building projects of Statius' friend Pollius Felix, Amphion and Orpheus appear in their familiar double act.³⁶ Since Pollius Felix is both a poet and a builder, they illustrate his admirable civilising control over nature at the same time as hinting at his poetic prowess.³⁷

For Statius, however, Amphion is not just one among several mythical poets, second best to the more famous Orpheus. Since Statius is the author of a *Thebaid*, he, too, is a 'Theban' poet, and he constructs Amphion as a literary ancestor. This association is made explicit, for example, in the proem to Statius' final, unfinished epic project, the *Achilleid*, when the poet asks Apollo for new inspiration after finishing the *Thebaid* (*Achil.* 1.8-13):³⁸

tu modo, si veterem digno deplevimus haustu,	8
da fontes mihi, Phoebe, novos ac fronde secunda	
necte comas: neque enim Aonium nemus advena pulso	10
nec mea nunc primis augescunt tempora vittis.	
scit Dircaeus ager meque inter prisca parentum	
nomina cumque suo numerant Amphione Thebae.	

Only you, Phoebus, grant me new founts if I have drained the old one with a worthy draught, and bind my hair with auspicious leafage; for not as a stranger do I knock at the Aonian grove, nor are these the first fillets to amplify my temples. The land of Dirce knows it, and Thebes numbers me among her fathers' ancient names along with her own Amphion.

³⁶ *Silvae* 3.1 is discussed in ch. 4 above.

³⁷ See *Silv.* 2.2.60-2 and 3.1.16-17 and 115, discussed above (p. 142 and p. 168 n. 101). Newlands (2011), 136 *ad Silv.* 2.2.60-1 sees in the mention of Amphion there, between Arion and Orpheus, all of whom are surpassed by Pollius Felix, a playful reference to Statius' own *Thebaid* (*Silv.* 2.2.60-1: *chelys Thebais*). On Amphion and Orpheus as civilisers in this passage Lovatt (2007), 149-52.

³⁸ See Heslin (2005), 102: 'Statius is like Amphion because he "constructed Thebes" with his lyre, building the city in the imagination of the audience of his previous epic, stone by stone, word by word. ... Other poets might use this metaphor of city building, or compare themselves to Amphion and Orpheus; but because Statius has written an epic about Thebes, he can claim a much closer analogy with the lyre of Amphion.' The translation is adapted from Shackleton Bailey (2003).

Statius claims that he is now a ‘poetic’ founder of Thebes alongside Amphion, implicitly setting up his own poetic edifice, the *Thebaid*, as parallel to Amphion’s Theban walls. The suggestion is that he has refounded Thebes through a song comparable to that of Amphion. In the *Silvae*, too, ‘there is play with the equation of Amphion and Statius as poetic founders of Thebes’.³⁹ In *Silvae* 3.2, the poet prays for a safe journey for Maecius Celer. He asks the sea-god Palaemon and his mother Leucothea, who are of Theban origin, for a safe voyage (*Silv.* 3.2.39-41):⁴⁰

Tu tamen ante omnes diva cum matre, Palaemon,
annue, si vestras amor est mihi pandere Thebas
nec cano degeneri Phoebeum Amphiona plectro.

But above all grant my favour, Palaemon, with your goddess mother, if
it is my desire to tell of your Thebes and I sing Phoebus’ Amphion
with no degenerate lyre.

Since Ino, Palaemon and Amphion all feature in the proem of the *Thebaid* (1.13-14, 1.9-10), Statius is clearly evoking the opening of his epic. By juxtaposing *Amphiona* and *plectro*, he suggests that his own *plectrum* and lyre are not inferior to those of Amphion.

In the *Silvae* and the *Achilleid* Amphion thus appears in his now-familiar role, symbolising the power of poetry and its civilising force. However, Statius goes further than the poets already discussed since he represents Amphion as his mythical (Theban) predecessor and draws a comparison between his own poetic powers and those of the legendary Theban founder. With this parallel between Amphion and the poet in mind, we turn to Statius’ *Thebaid*.

³⁹ Cowan (2002), 197.

⁴⁰ Ino and her son Melicertes (later turned into the divinities Leucothea and Palaemon) play a considerable role in the *Thebaid*, even though their story falls outside the chronological scope of the epic. Jörn Soerink has argued in a lecture given in Münster (Germany) in January 2011 that they function as an important Theban paradigm for the many dead children and bereaved mothers of the *Thebaid*. It appears that several of the myths named by Statius in his proem as lying outside the scope of his epic (*Theb.* 1.3-16), among them the myths of Amphion and Ino/Melicertes, are in fact referred to frequently throughout the epic, providing, in different capacities, a Theban framework for understanding the events of the narrative proper. The role of the ‘untold stories’ of the proem in the whole of the *Thebaid* deserves further investigation. The translation is adapted from Shackleton Bailey (2003).

5. *'When song was great': Amphion's Walls in Statius' Thebaid*⁴¹

Perhaps we now expect Amphion to provide (yet again) an *exemplum* of the power of poetry, one that carries a special relevance because of the close association between the two 'Theban' poets.⁴² However, the role of Amphion in the *Thebaid* turns out to be quite different from what the proem of the *Achilleid* or the comparisons between Pollius Felix and Amphion might lead us to expect. Amphion and his walls do feature prominently in the *Thebaid* (as does a homonymous descendant of Amphion, one of the Theban leaders),⁴³ but the founder-poet appears as a deeply ambiguous figure, an emblem of the power of poetry as well as of its ultimate lack of power.⁴⁴ Amphion's combination of magical singing and of civilising force is turned back on itself when the *Thebaid* explores what happens to the creative, poetic magic of Amphion in a world of war, of city-destruction and of un-founding. Statius goes far beyond the tension, brought out by Seneca in the *Hercules Furens* and the *Phoenissae*, between the peace and harmony of the past foundation and the destructive present of Thebes. The poet of the *Thebaid* gradually dismantles the walls and their magic as the narrative proceeds.

But while Amphionic poetry is shown to lose its power in the world of the *Thebaid*, Statius' own poetic achievement is thereby implicitly raised to new heights. While Amphion sang Thebes into existence, Statius (on a different level) sings it into defeat, disintegration, and destruction,⁴⁵ and as Amphion's power crumbles, Statius demonstrates his mastery of the destructive poetics of the *Thebaid*.

⁴¹ The title of this section derives from the poem 'Amphion' by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), beginning 'Oh, had I lived when song was great, / In days of old Amphion ...'. The poem consists of a humorous series of reflections on the mythical Amphion's legendary poetic skill (which appears to be conflated with that of Orpheus) and the sad decline that poetry has taken since these 'days of old'. The poet sadly surveys his overgrown garden (possibly also an image for his own poetic material?) and with comic nostalgia praises Amphion's magical-poetic power over plants, which he himself lacks.

⁴² Cf. Klooster (2011) on Apollonius in the *Argonautica* presenting himself 'as a latter-day embodiment of the Apollo-related singer/religious expert Orpheus' (91).

⁴³ Amphion the younger appears several times in the later books of the epic: in 7.278-81 (catalogue of Theban warriors), 9.776-801 (fighting Parthenopaeus) and 10.387-492 (discovering Hoplaus and Dymas). See further below, p. 193.

⁴⁴ Cf. Lovatt (2007), who investigates the role of Orpheus in Statius' *Silvae*, concluding that Orpheus, too, serves to demonstrate the failure of poetry as well as its power (see esp. 153-61).

⁴⁵ It will become clear that I take a different view from Cowan (2002), who argues that 'to narrate the story of Thebes from its origin is similar to the action of founding it' (197). It seems

Moving Mountains: Amphion in the Proem

We encounter Amphion for the first time in the proem of the epic. The poet professes to feel overwhelmed by the richness of Theban mythical history, does not know where to begin and asks the Muses for guidance. One of the events which he says he is unable to sing about in his epic is the building of the walls of Thebes by song (1.9-10): *quo carmine muris / iusserit Amphion Tyriis accedere montes* – ‘with what song Amphion ordered the mountains to approach the Tyrian walls’.⁴⁶ This first appearance leads into the story of Amphion’s walls in the *Thebaid*. The word *carmen* that is used for the song Amphion sings in order to charm the rocks is repeated only a few lines further on, when the poet calls his own epic, likewise, *carmen* (1.16).⁴⁷ This is the first hint that Amphion’s work is in some way parallel to the epic work of Statius, that the mythical founder should be seen as a poet in a similar sense to the author of the *Thebaid*.⁴⁸ At this point, Amphion seems to have the upper hand in any comparison. While the proem conveys a stance of doubt and disorientation, Amphion’s song, in the hyperbolic expression of the poet, could move whole mountains. Furthermore, the author claims that his epic is unable to include the larger mythical history of Thebes (part of it the wall-building of Amphion) – the Statian *carmen* cannot contain the Amphionic one.⁴⁹

Don’t Play It Again: Amphion in *Thebaid* 2

However, the next appearance of Amphion’s walls in book 2 of the epic already begins to reveal their essential weakness. Tydeus has been sent to Eteocles from

to me that, in spite of numerous delays and deviations, Statius is narrating the city into destruction – if anything, he is un-founding Thebes. For the destructive teleology of the *Thebaid*, cf. McNelis’s (2007) reading of the *Thebaid*, which explores the tension between two opposed narrative forces in the *Thebaid*: the ‘teleological’ tendency of the martial epic to move to its (destructive) conclusion, and a ‘Callimachean’ strand of the narrative that impedes and delays this movement.

⁴⁶ The text of the *Thebaid* is taken from Hill (1983) unless otherwise noted. Translations are adapted from Shackleton Bailey (2003).

⁴⁷ *carmen* is the conventional word for poets to use of their own epic (cf. e.g. *perpetuum carmen* in Ov. *Met.* 1.4), which makes an appearance of the word in a proem while *not* referring to the poet’s own work all the more marked. Again, Amphion’s *carmen* seems to unite the meanings of song and magic (see n. 24 above).

⁴⁸ Cowan (2002), 197, also suggests that *nunc tendo chelyn* (1.33) ‘may just resonate’ because of the earlier mention of Amphion.

⁴⁹ On the significance of the ‘excluded’ events of the proem, see also n. 40 above.

Argos to negotiate, but Eteocles refuses to surrender the power to his brother. Tydeus departs on a threat (2.452-5):

‘reddes,’
ingeminat ‘reddes; non si te ferreus agger
ambiat aut triplices alio tibi carmine muros
Amphion auditus agat, ...

‘You shall return it (i.e. power)’ and again, ‘You shall return it! Though
an iron rampart surround you or Amphion with another song be heard
and make you triple walls ...’

Tydeus here, for the first time and still implicitly, utters what will become more and more apparent throughout the epic. He claims that the walls of Amphion, once the pride of Thebes, built by the musical magic of a son of Zeus, no longer function in the present times. They will not afford Eteocles protection, and even if Amphion returned to sing another song and erect a threefold wall, this would not be enough to keep Thebes safe.⁵⁰ Amphion’s magic song appears out of place in the present. Amphion’s status as the personification of the power of poetry is drawn into doubt: even a triple effort from him would not be heeded by Tydeus. As war threatens, the peaceful magic of Amphion loses its relevance.

Patch-up Work: Amphion in *Thebaid* 4

Amphion’s walls fare steadily worse as the epic proceeds. In book 4, we learn that his walls and mighty towers are crumbling and falling down because of insufficient care, and are therefore being shoddily patched up (4.356-60):

ipsa vetusto	356
moenia lapsa situ magnaue Amphionis arces	
iam fessum senio nudant latus, et fide sacra	
aequatos caelo surdum atque ignobile muros	
firmat opus.	360

Even the walls have fallen with ancient neglect, and Amphion’s great towers lay bare a flank decayed with age. Mute ignoble toil (or: deaf

⁵⁰ On *alio* here having the force of *altero*, see Mulder (1954) *ad loc.*, who compares Verg. *Aen.* 6.89: *alius* ... *Achilles*. On the word *alius* in Latin epic, see Hardie (1993) 17-18.

ignoble work)⁵¹ strengthens the ramparts that the sacred lyre once levelled with heaven.

When Amphion first built the walls with his divine talent (*fide sacra*), they reached to the heavens. But the time of Amphion's magic has passed. The walls are no longer strong but in danger of collapse. The repair works have to proceed without song: a *surdum atque ignobile opus*.⁵² The passage conveys a nostalgic longing for the times when Amphion's song still functioned and his walls were still strong and magical.⁵³

The doom hanging over the weakened walls is also brought out by the hyperbolic phrase *aequatos caelo* – 'made equal to heaven', which recalls book 4 of Vergil's *Aeneid*.⁵⁴ There, Dido, crazed by her love for Aeneas, neglects the building of her city, Carthage (*Aen.* 4.86-9):

non coeptae adsurgunt turre, non arma iuventus
exercent portusve aut propugnacula bello
tuta parant: pendent opera interrupta, minaeque
murorum ingentes aequataque machina caelo.

The towers that had been begun do not rise, the young men do not exercise in arms, or prepare harbours or safe bulwarks for war; the works are broken off and stand idle – the huge merlons of the walls and the crane⁵⁵ soaring to the sky.

⁵¹ *opus* can mean either the labour of the workmen, or the product of the labour, i.e. the repair works. The meaning of *surdus* changes accordingly: In the first case, the workmen's toil is mute, because they do not sing as Amphion did. In the second, the repairs to the walls are called 'deaf', since they do not hear the song of Amphion. The latter is endorsed by an authority cited in Barth (1664) *ad* 359: '*surdum*. Schol. Vet.: *non enim audiebant saxa sonum testudinis, ut priora illa.*'

⁵² Cf. Sen. *Phoen.* 568-9, discussed above, p. 182-3, where the building of the walls with song and lyre is contrasted not with the *silence* of 'regular' building, but with the ugly noise of a creaking crane.

⁵³ The walls have disintegrated at an alarming speed, bearing in mind the chronology of the epic. Barth (1664) notes (*ad* 356) that it is simply impossible that these walls should already be crumbling: Amphion, he argues, was the predecessor of Laius, the father of Oedipus, whose sons are the cause of war.

⁵⁴ The parallel is noted by Barth (1664), *ad loc.*

⁵⁵ Commentators since Servius have disagreed about the meaning of *machina*. The word is more often translated as 'crane' (see the exhaustive discussion of Pease (1967), 160 *ad loc.* and Austin (1955), 49 *ad loc.*), but could also refer simply to the 'structure' of the fortified walls rather than to machinery (Williams (1972), 341 *ad loc.*, agreeing with Servius). See also p. 140, n. 7 above about the interpretation of *machina* in *Silvae* 1.1.64.

The allusion suggests a connection between Vergilian Carthage and Statian Thebes. Both passages describe a scene of construction and city-fortification, and in both cases, there is a problem with the process of construction: in the case of Thebes, it proceeds with difficulty, in Carthage it has come to a temporary halt. Both cities are ultimately doomed to destruction, although disaster is a lot closer for Thebes, where the period of hopeful initial construction has long passed. The shoddy repair works to the Amphionian walls, a pale recollection of the bustling building-site described in the *Aeneid*, are a late attempt to stave off destruction which will come, and soon.

Although Carthage in the *Aeneid* is a budding young city, its eventual fate is clear to any Roman reader. Its destruction is also already prefigured in a famous simile, where the panic in the city after Dido's suicide is compared to the panic in a city taken by enemies and on fire (4.669-71).⁵⁶ In the *Aeneid*, the simile hints at events in the remote future, but for Thebes, imminent destruction is a terrible reality.⁵⁷

Times of War: Amphion in *Thebaid* 7

In book 7, the Argives have finally arrived outside Thebes, and they pitch their camp on a hill near the city (7.441-51):

haud procul inde iugum tutisque accommoda castris	441
arva notant, unde urbem etiam turresque videre	
Sidonias; placuit sedes fidiq̄ue receptus	
colle per excelsum patulo quem subter aperto	
arva sinu, nullique aliis a montibus instant	445
despectus; nec longa labor munimina durus	
addidit: ipsa loco mirum natura favebat.	
in vallum elatae rupes devexaque fossis	

⁵⁶ ... non aliter, quam si immissis ruat hostibus omnis / Karthago aut antiqua Tyros, flammaeque furentes / culmina perque hominum volvantur perque deorum. See also p. 129 in ch. 3 above.

⁵⁷ For the destruction of the walls see 10.877-82 (on which see further below, p. 194-7) and 12.703-6. Statius also imitates the *Aeneid* simile at *Theb.* 7.599-601, where, again, the terribly realistic force of the simile for the Thebans is apparent (see Smolenaars (1994) *ad loc.*). In order to strengthen the connection, Thebes is there (and elsewhere) called 'Sidonian', Vergil's usual adjective for Carthage. Statius frequently calls Thebes the 'Sidonian' city, alluding to the Phoenician origin of Cadmus (on which see e.g. *Theb.* 1.5, 180-5, 3.181-2, 300, 8.229-32, 11.210-14). He uses the adjective as synonymous to 'Theban': 3.656, 4.648, 7.632, 8.330, 696, 9.144, 567, 709, 10.125, 297, 306. For *Sidonius* as referring to the city, see *Theb.* 7.443 (with Smolenaars (1994) *ad loc.*), 7.600, 8.218, 10.481, 11.303.

aequa et fortuito ductae quater aggere pinnae;
 cetera dant ipsi, donec sol montibus omnis
 erepsit rebusque dedit sopor otia fessis. 450

Not far from there they mark a ridge, ground suitable for a safe encampment, from which they can even see the city with her Sidonian towers. The station pleased them, offering secure reception: a hill with spreading top, beneath which an open slope of fields, not overlooked by other heights. And no hard toil added long lines of fortifications; its own nature favoured the spot to a marvel. Rocks rose to form a rampart, the slopes were as good as ditches, and four merlons were raised from the chance mound. The rest they themselves supply, until all sun crept from the hills and sleep gave rest to weariness.

While the Argives seem to have found the ideal situation for their camp, their arrival causes panic in the city of Thebes (7.452-9):⁵⁸

quis queat attonitas dictis ostendere Thebas? 452
 urbem in conspectu belli suprema parantis
 territat insomnem nox atra diemque minatur.
 discurrunt muris; nil saeptum horrore sub illo, 455
 nil fidum satis, invalidaeque Amphionis arces.
 rumor ubique alius pluresque adnuntiat hostes,
 maioresque timor; spectant tentoria contra
 Inachia externosque suis in montibus ignes.

Who could portray in words the shock of Thebes? In sight of war likely to be the end of them black night terrifies the sleepless city and threatens day. They run about the walls. In that terror nothing is truly guarded, nothing is safe enough, Amphion's towers are feeble. Rumour, everywhere another one, announces more enemies, and fear greater ones. They see the Inachian tents confronting them and strangers' fires in their own hills.

We are already getting used to it: the walls of Amphion are once again useless, *invalidae*. For the terrified Thebans they seem to offer no protection against the enemy. The striking contrast between the two passages offers further illustration of why and how this is the case.

⁵⁸ The description of the panic-stricken city belongs to a whole category of similar descriptions in epic (perhaps this tradition is hinted at in the phrase *quis queat ... dictis ostendere*). The typology of such descriptions and the specific links of the Statian passage with different models are analysed by Smolenaars (1994), 199-202.

The effortless erection of the Argive camp is described at length. The place is naturally so well suited to a fortification (*ipsa loco mirum natura favebat*) that the Argives can turn it into their camp without a *labor durus*. Once upon a time, the walls of Amphion had also been built without effort and physical toil, and the description of the natural features of the site in fact evokes the Amphionic magical wall-building, since rocks have been raised (*elatae*) by nature rather than man to form the walls of the camp (*vallum*). *natura* has done most of the work, allowing the Argives to build their camp in only one day (*cetera dant ipsi, donec sol montibus omnis / erepsit*). But while there is miraculously fast building (*mirum*) for the Argives, the Thebans have to toil to patch up their walls (as we saw in 4.359-60) and still, they doubt that their walls can protect them.⁵⁹

This contrast between ease and hard work is also strengthened by the close intertextual relation between the Argives' camp-building and a scene from the third book of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. There, Caesar's soldiers also fortify a hill, which lies next to the city of Massilia, in order to capture that city; they then try to connect fortification and city by a huge rampart.⁶⁰ The verbal parallels between the two passages are used to highlight an essential difference: Lucan especially stresses the huge amount of work, the *immensus labor* (Luc. 3.381) that the Caesarian soldiers have to carry out. The Argives, in contrast, are specifically said *not* to require a *labor durus*. Once, Amphion, too, built the walls of Thebes without a *labor durus*. But in the *Thebaid's* destructive world of war, it is only camp-building that is accomplished with magical ease. Amphion's peaceful, civilising magic of city and wall-building has lost its power and become irrelevant.

⁵⁹ The magical creation of the camp through the cooperation of nature is reminiscent of the villa poems in Statius' *Silvae*. Amphion is explicitly evoked as an *exemplum* in *Silv.* 2.2 and 3.1, and the idea of nature favouring the spot is present in 1.3.15-17. On the cooperation between builder and nature in building projects, see also p. 59, n. 49 and Reitz (forthcoming) in Heirman/Klooster.

⁶⁰ The parallels are noted by Smolenaars (1994), 195-8. Luc. 3.375-87 is the most important intertext, although the fortifications are not finished until 3.458. The description of the fortification-hill begins with *haud procul*, just as the Statian description. *tutis accomoda castris* in the *Thebaid* recalls the Lucanian *tutis aptissima castris* (3.378). The lexical parallels are specifically employed to bring out the difference between the two superficially similar situations. Caesar's soldiers are supposed to surround the hill with fortifications (*longo munimine cingi*, Luc. 3.377). The hill chosen by the Argives is already fortified: *nec longa labor munimina durus addidit* (*Theb.* 7.446). The Argives' easy progress contrasts with the hard work that Caesar's soldiers have to carry out: *tunc res immenso placuit statura labore* (Luc. 3.381). Furthermore, terrified Thebes is a far cry from brave Massilia (*urbem / haud trepidam*, 3.372-3).

Armed with a Lyre: Amphion the Younger

Before the arrival of the Argives, book 7 also features the catalogue of Theban troops, viewed by Antigone and Phorbas, Laios' aged armour-bearer, from the walls of Thebes. One of the warriors introduced in the course of this catalogue is also called Amphion, and we learn that he is a descendant of the famous Theban founder. Phorbas describes him as follows (7.277-9):

hos regis egenos
Amphion en noster agit (cognoscere pronum,
virgo) lyra galeam tauroque insignis avito.

As they [a band of rustic warriors] lack a king, see, our Amphion leads them (he is easy to recognise, maiden), his helmet conspicuous with lyre and ancestral bull.⁶¹

The description of the present-day Amphion further serves to establish the *Thebaid* as an epic of war in which the peaceful magic of the more famous Amphion has no place. In the Antiope, Hermes had pointedly asked Amphion to arm himself with his lyre.⁶² Now, Amphion's descendant has reverted to bearing real arms (more of a Zethus than an Amphion), while Amphion's lyre, instrument of peace and civilisation, has been demoted to a piece of military decoration.⁶³

⁶¹ The group of warriors led by Amphion is made up of three contingents whose origin is described in *Theb.* 7.271-5: those from Onchestos, those from the region of Mycalessos, the river Melas and the spring Gargaphie, and the ones from Haliartus. See Smolenaars (1994), 135-6.

⁶² *Antiope* fr. 223.91 (Collard)/223.120 (TrGF). See p. 175 above.

⁶³ While the image of the lyre on Amphion's helmet is easily identifiable as referring to the elder Amphion, the significance of the *taurus avitus* is less clear. The phrase could refer to Zeus, who abducted Europa in the form of a bull (see *Theb.* 1.5: *Sidonias raptus*), forcing her brother Cadmus to go in search of her and found Thebes (suggested by Shackleton Bailey (2003), 40 n. 1), or possibly to the river-god Asopos, in some versions called the father of Antiope, though not by Statius himself (see Smolenaars (1994), 138 *ad* 279). It seems simpler to read *avitus* as meaning 'of his ancestors' (*OLD* 2, also supported by Smolenaars), in which case the bull could simply refer to the punishment of Dirce, and probably evoke Amphion's twin Zethus. The same division of the symbols lyre-Amphion and bull-Zethus also appears in Sen. *Oed.* 609-12 (see above, p. 181 and n. 30).

Un-founding Thebes: Amphion in *Thebaid* 10

The story of the failure of Amphionic poetry reaches its climax in book 10 of the *Thebaid*. In this episode, one of the seven Argive leaders, Capaneus, is accorded a very special *aristeia*, in an episode full of drama and hyperbole, which has aroused both the admiration and the wrath of commentators.⁶⁴ Capaneus is tired of earthly battles and begins to climb towards heaven. First with the help of a ladder, then simply through thin air, he climbs first above the battlements of the walls of Thebes, then continues towards heaven. Missiles cannot hurt him, for a moment he seems invincible and determined to fight the gods themselves, until Jupiter finally kills him with one of his thunderbolts.

On his way towards heaven, Capaneus in passing deals the death blow to Amphion's walls, reversing Amphion's poetic foundation with brute force. Capaneus is towering above the city of Thebes (10.870-82):

utque petita diu celsus fastigia supra	870
eminuit trepidamque adsurgens desuper urbem	
vidit et ingenti Thebas exterruit umbra,	
increpat attonitos: 'humilesne Amphionis arces? ⁶⁵	
pro pudor! hi faciles carmenque imbelles secuti,	
hi, mentita diu Thebarum fabula, muri?	875
et quid tam egregium prosternere moenia molli	
structa lyra?' simul insultans gressuque manuque	
molibus obstantes cuneos tabulataque saevus	
restruit: ⁶⁶ absiliunt pontes, tectique tremantis	
saxea frena labant, dissaepoque aggere rursus	880
utitur et truncas rupes in templa domosque	
praecipitat frangitque suis iam moenibus urbem.	

⁶⁴ Leigh (2006), *passim*, and esp. 238-9 on Barth.

⁶⁵ I follow the punctuation supported by Williams (1972). Hill (1983) punctuates differently but obelises 873-5. Shackleton Bailey (1983), 58-9, argues for Capaneus' speech beginning in 874, at *pro pudor!*. These three lines present numerous textual problems (Barth (1664), *ad* 10.867: *impeditus est sermo, non spirat Papinium*): see Williams (1972), 129-30 *ad* 873f., Cowan (2002), 240 n. 495. Hall/Ritchie/Edwards (2007) print *haene illae* instead of *humilesne* at 10.873, a reading that Barth claimed to have seen in *ille optimis melior antiquissimus Codex*.

⁶⁶ The unparalleled *restruit* is corrected in several MSS to *destruit*, which Shackleton Bailey (2003) prints. Hill (1983) retains *restruit*, also defended by Williams (1972), 130, *ad loc*. If correct, *restruit* would be a striking expression of Capaneus' reversal of the construction of the Theban walls, on which see below.

Finally he stands out high above the long-sought summit and rising sees the afflicted town below, terrifying Thebes with his huge shadow. Thus he taunts the dismayed Thebans: 'Are the citadels of Amphion so insignificant then? For shame! These are the willing walls that followed an unwarlike song, the long-told lying legend of Thebes? And what great feat is it to flatten the structures of a soft lyre?' Thereupon he falls upon the blocks with foot and hand, and fiercely unbuilds wedges and planks standing in his path. The bridges fly apart, the stone ties of the covering roof give way, the rampart is dismantled. He uses it again, hurling the mutilated rocks down upon temples and houses, smashing the city with her own walls.

In this passage the walls of Thebes are for the last time explicitly called the walls of Amphion. Of all the passages I have discussed, this provides the clearest statement of the dysfunctionality of Amphionic poetics in the world of the *Thebaid*. The poetic *opus* of Amphion is now completely humiliated and powerless, derided and destroyed by Capaneus.⁶⁷

The brutal demolition literally reverses Amphion's civilising wall-building and city-foundation. The elements of the city that Capaneus destroys are precisely those one would expect to be built and set up in a description of city foundation (a number of which were discussed in chapter 3): city walls, fortifications, houses, roofs, and temples. Capaneus is un-founding Thebes. Where the archetypal founding activity is the building of walls to keep a city safe, he turns the walls of Thebes against herself, smashing her with the very fortifications which were to protect her (*frangit suis iam moenibus urbem*). Civilisation deteriorates and reverts back to uncultivated rawness: stones which had long ago been shaped and built up into civilised structures like walls, roofs, bridges and ramparts now turn back into bare rocks (*rupes*). But Capaneus is not only an un-founder in a general sense, he is specifically undoing the Amphionic foundation of the Theban walls.⁶⁸ In response

⁶⁷ This scene is briefly foreshadowed in an episode in *Theb.* 7.649-87, where Capaneus kills the Bacchic priest Euneus. Euneus entreats the Argives to spare the sacred walls of Thebes, adducing *inter alia* their mythical construction as an argument (7.665: *parcite, in haec ultro scopuli venere volentes*). Capaneus, armed with an *aeria* ... *basta* (7.669) which already points to his later ascent towards heaven, derides Euneus' arguments and kills the priest while expressing his scorn of the prophet's song (7.679): '*haec Tyriis cane matribus!*' The scene is analysed by Klinnert (1970), 39-42, who also links the two passages (54 n. 146).

⁶⁸ There is also a sense in which he undoes Menoeceus recent 're-foundation' of Thebes (10.786-8: *omni / concinitur vulgo Cadmum atque Amphiona supra / conditor* – 'and all the folk ... sing him [i.e. Menoeceus] as their founder above Cadmus and Amphion'); see also Vessey (1973), 123 with n. 5, for Menoeceus' death as a re-foundation. When Capaneus prepares to attack the

to Amphion's song, the stones built themselves up and joined together of their own accord. Now that his poetic magic has gone, the stones fall down and split apart of their own accord as well: *pontes absiliunt, frena labant*.

In the taunts that he hurls at the walls, Capaneus gives vent to his utter contempt for the poetic magic of Amphion. The stones followed a *carmenque imbelles*, an 'unwarlike song', and they were *molli / structa lyra* – 'built by an unmanly lyre'. The suggestion that Amphion's song was *mollis* has a specific generic ring to it (*mollis* is regularly used to describe poetry that is not epic, and in particular love-poetry – combined with *lyra* Capaneus perhaps conveys a suggestion that Amphion sang a lyric song about amatory themes?),⁶⁹ but more importantly, it is a broad swipe at the weakness of tame old Amphion's peaceful music.⁷⁰ Capaneus' harsh language does not disguise the fact that his taunts have already been proved correct throughout the epic. Amphion's *carmen* was indeed *imbelles*, in that it was a song that brought about foundation peacefully. The *Thebaid*'s inhuman war has robbed it of its strength. The moment of complete civilisatory reversal, of un-foundation, coincides with the final disappearance of the last trace of Amphion's magic.⁷¹

walls, he feels drawn to the place 'where the tower is slippery with the blood of Menoeceus' (*Menoecio qua lubrica sanguine turris*, *Theb.* 7.846), marking his action also as an undoing of Menoeceus actions: Cowan (2002), 238-9. On Menoeceus and Capaneus see also Heinrich (1999), 184-9.

⁶⁹ It is, in fact, used by Propertius in a poem which deals with the drawbacks of writing a *Thebaid*. In poem 1.7, Propertius warns a poet-colleague called Ponticus, who is in the process of composing an epic *Thebaid*, that such poetry will not help him to win over his love. He suggests that Ponticus should really be busy *mollem componere versum* (1.7.19), contrasting this with the *carmen grave* (1.9.9) that Ponticus *is* in fact writing, and which deals with the walls of Amphion: *quid tibi nunc misero prodest grave dicere camen / aut Amphioniae moenia flere lyrae*, 1.9.9-10). Capaneus' attack subverts the distinctions between genres in suggesting that the quintessentially epic hero Amphion only composed love-poetry himself.

⁷⁰ *mollis* is often used in Latin texts in a way that can perhaps be compared to the word 'gay', which (worryingly) seems to have become a generally derogatory adjective in modern usage. See Edwards (1993), ch. 2 for an analysis of the language of *mollitia* as used in Roman political discourse not to sexual ends but as a means of verbal power-play.

⁷¹ Capaneus also taunts the walls as *mentita diu Thebarum fabula* – 'the long-told lying tale of Thebes'. This taunt may (if Capaneus is indeed '[e]schewing consistency for rhetorical and poetic effect ...', as Cowan (2002), 240 suggests) imply that the entire story of the walls' foundation is a lie. It seems more likely that *mentita fabula* refers to a legendary special magical impregnability of the walls due to their mythical origins, perhaps 'by analogy with those of Troy built by Apollo and Neptune' (Cowan (2002), 240), which Capaneus is about to finally disprove through his act of destruction.

An implicit contrast has been building up throughout the epic between, on the one hand, the disturbing destruction of Amphion's walls and the weakening of the powers of Amphionic song in the face of war, and, on the other hand, the power of Statian poetry to tell of this war and destruction. To tell of the transgressions of Capaneus, the narrator had asked the Muses for further, greater inspiration (10.829-31):

non mihi iam solito vatum de more canendum;
maior ab Aoniis poscenda amentia lucis:
mecum omnes audete deae!

No longer may I sing in the wonted fashion of poets; I must ask for a higher lunacy from Aonia's groves. Goddesses all, dare with me!

While one poet's song is ground into the dust, another's rises to new heights. While Amphion's poetic magic of foundation and civilisation has gradually been dismantled and proven ineffective, Statius' own song soars further and further above the ordinary to tell the story of war and destruction. In the *Silvae* and the *Achilleid*, Statius encourages comparison between Amphion and himself. At the end of the *Thebaid*, Statius is the last man singing, while Amphion's *opus* has been destroyed.

6. Conclusion

In chapter 3, where I investigated city-building as a poetological metaphor, I concluded that one aspect of the city-building metaphor that poets particularly exploit is the prestige of *foundation*. Suggesting an analogy between their own poetic composition and the foundation of a city serves as a way of enhancing the prestige of the poetic creation. The narrative of Amphion turns this analogy into identity: the mythical poet really *is* a founder. Most of the treatments of the Amphion-myth in Latin literature seize upon this identification of foundation and poetic composition, exploiting it as illustration of the power of poetry to impact on reality. In the *Thebaid*, however, we see the opposite mechanism at work. There, Statius increases his own poetic prestige precisely by dissociating himself from the founder-poet Amphion. By describing the ultimate failure of Amphion's peaceful poetry in a world of war, Statius implicitly raises himself above his mythical predecessor as the poet who is able to *unfound* Amphionic Thebes through song.

Seneca and Statius both highlight the discrepancy between Amphion's poetic foundation and the ultimately feeble nature of his poetic *opus*. The myth of Amphion elicits questions about the wholeness and stability of poetic artefacts. At first sight, it seemed to tell such an optimistic story about the power of poetry, but the destruction wrought upon the walls of song leaves us with a disconcerting sense of the fragility of poetic constructs. The theme of destruction, both physical and poetic, will be further explored in the concluding chapter.