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Becoming sisters: Antigone and Argia in Statius' *Thebaid*

This paper argues that in Statius' *Thebaid* 12 Argia in a way becomes Antigone's sister in the episode dealing with the burial of Polynices. This is achieved not only through their act of mourning (Lovatt 1999, 138; Bernstein 2008, 100) but also through the poem's earlier representations of sisters as storytellers of, and mediators in, civil war.

Antigone and Ismene accompany their mother Jocasta in her embassy to Polynices in Book 7, in order to influence their brother's decision through their mere presence, tears and implorations. In Book 8 we meet them again, this time within the palace of Thebes, where they spend their time retelling the events of the war, siding with one or the other of their brothers, and lamenting the misfortunes of their family. After Ismene's suicide in Book 11, Argia comes to fill in the gap. During the night episode on the battlefield in Book 12, she and Antigone strike an unprecedented relationship: going beyond their epic precedents of sisters-in-law, they behave like real sisters. In particular, they replay in reverse order the actions of Antigone and Ismene, first by taking turns to tell war tales, then by trying to stop the brothers quarrelling even after death.

Sisters counterbalance brothers in Statius' poem: but they fail to stop the civil war, and they are not allowed to tell its story, at least not within the limits of the poem. Antigone also dies, and the family bonds re-establish themselves once again, with Argia joining her real sister Deipyle in the final lines of the poem. The civil war is over, the burial of the Argive dead has been granted, and sisters – a different set than before – turn to telling stories about the war that are once again beyond the reach of the poem's audience.

References

Bernstein, N. (2008) *In the Image of the Ancestors: Narratives of Kinship in Flavian Epic*. Toronto, Buffalo and London [University of Toronto Press]

Lovatt, H. (1999) 'Competing endings: re-reading the end of the *Thebaid* through Lucan', *Ramus* 28.2: 126-51