

Lucan Gobbet

Lucan's *The Civil War*, which can also be known as the *Pharsalia*, is a Roman epic poem that portrays and depicts the events of Julius Caesar's civil war against his Roman troops, who were being led by Pompey the Great. This poem was written by the Roman poet Lucan, who was writing contemporary to the reign of Emperor Nero, and work was begun on the *Pharsalia* around 61AD. This poem features 10 books, each depicting different stages of this civil war. However, the source that I will be discussing is an extract from Book X (10). In summary, this particular book talks about Caesar meeting Cleopatra for the first time, before an initial surprise attack is foiled. A second attack is carried out, but Lucan ends the scene whilst Caesar is still battling, so the ending of the fight is unknown from this source alone.

The particular extract of this source that I will be writing about comes from pages 591-593 of *The Civil War*, and begins with the quote "There lies the mad son of Macedonian Philip, that fortunate freebooter". It is quite clear that this quote is talking about Alexander the Great, as it is well known that Alexander was initially buried in Alexandria (Blakemore, 2019), which was the capital city of Egypt during this time period, which is supported earlier on in Book X of *The Civil War* where it is said how Caesar "moved to the Egyptian Capital". Another key point that shows how this quote is talking about Alexander the Great is how it mentions his father was 'Macedonian Phil', which again is common knowledge that Alexander the Great was Philip II of Macedon (Blakemore, 2019).

The next quote from this gobbet that I will be discussing is the quote "cut off by a death that avenged the world... fortune spared his dead body, and the destiny of his reign endured to the last". It is quite clear from the first part of the above quote is that the death of Alexander the Great came in a time of need for the world, as he had carried out many triumphant invasions and raids across the globe (which is mentioned later on in the source) that led to vast amounts of bloodshed on his behalf. This can be backed up by many other sources in history (both contemporary and non-contemporary) that discuss Alexander's lust for bloodshed and gaining power, such as *Historia de Preliis* (Pritchard, 1992), which translates to 'The History of Alexander's Battles'. However, there are some accounts of invasions that didn't end well for Alexander, in that he didn't gain the land he attempted to. This is apparent in *Historia de Preliis*, where Pritchard discusses his interaction with Thalestris- the Queen of the Amazons. This source mentions how Alexander and Thalestris agreed to not fight, leading to the Queen keeping her land safe from Alexander's army. This clearly shows that not all of the world would have been "avenged" by his death. This could therefore show a slight exaggeration in Lucan's work, which was probably done on purpose in an attempt to express how much of the world Alexander conquered, emphasising how brutal he was. This could also be supported by the extract later

discussing how he was a man “born to teach this bad lesson to the world”, meaning how one man attempting to rule many lands does not work, and eventually leads to the man gaining vast amounts of opposition across the globe. This is clearly apparent in Alexander’s case.

It is apparent that the main feature of this extract in particular discusses Alexander’s vast military triumphs. This is apparent from where it discusses how he “left his own obscure realm of Macedonia” and ends by saying how “no obstacle to him was heat, or sea, or barren Libya, or the Syrtes, or the desert”. In between these two quotes it is mentioned that he conquered many other places across Europe and Asia, including Athens and India. However, what is more interesting about this particular piece of the extract is the use of adjectives and extensive vocabulary used to emphasise the extent of his danger and power. For example, Lucan describes how Alexander was “mowing down mankind... a pestilence to earth, a thunderbolt that struck all peoples alike, a comet of disaster to mankind.” Again, the continuous use of this extensive vocabulary was probably carried out by Lucan as a way to emphasise Alexander’s savagery and lust for power and control of land. This is clearly another example of Lucan using poetic hyperbole in order to make readers believe that Alexander the Great was potentially worse than he actually was.

The next piece of this extract that I will discuss is where Lucan discusses how Alexander “carried away with him in his jealousy, and left no successor to inherit all his greatness”. This clearly discusses how Alexander took everything he had worked for throughout his life- including political power and position- to the grave, and did not leave any successor to take over in his place. However, it is clear that this point may contradict what I have found throughout my research. Walter of Châtillon’s *Alexandreis* discusses the interactions between Alexander and Thlaestris, and one particular parts mentions how the Amazonian Queen approached Alexander, offering she “fill her womb and leave again” (Townsend, 1996) in order for them to bare an offspring together that would have the powerful characteristics of both leaders. Despite this source discussing an interaction between the two ruler occurred, many modern scholars argue that this encounter did not actually happen, and is merely a legend. This would also explain why there are no accounts of a child between these two being born. This quote is also backed up by other accounts of Alexander’s death, as it is believed that following being questioned on who would succeed him, Alexander said “the strongest”, which therefore led to his kingdom being divided between 4 of his military companions (Mark, 2013). This therefore clearly shows that Alexander did have a successor, but none that would “inherit all his greatness” as the extract states.

The final piece of this extract that I will discuss mentions how much of an empire Rome had during the time of this poem being written, and how considerate they were of some cultures. This is apparent where Lucan discusses how “Roman rule extends to the north and home of the

west... behind the burning south wind”, but then later discusses how Rome “shall yield precedence to the lord of the Parthians” in the East. This clearly could be seen as Lucan comparing the differences between Julian Caesar and Alexander the Great as leaders, as Caesar is considerate of other cultures and therefore would not invade the East, whereas Alexander the Great was potentially less considerate and would invade whoever he felt like, unless they offered him something of value instead. An example of this offering can be found in *Historia de Preliis*, where Thalestris offered Alexander’s army 20 horses as a sign of peace and as a warning for him to not invade them, which he therefore accepted and moved on. It is clear that this encounter clearly shows that Alexander could be somewhat considerate at times. However, as previously mentioned, the reliability of whether this encounter actually occurred could be doubted, as different sources have different viewpoints on what happened between Alexander and the Amazons.

It is quite clear that this extract could be used as a base to gain an understanding of just what type of military leader Alexander the Great was. This is apparent as there are many similarities that could be made between this source and other sources on different events, as previously mentioned. However, it has also been previously mentioned that some doubt may have to be kept in mind if using this source on it’s own. This is because Lucan is a Roman poet, so he very well could exaggerate different points in order to make it more interesting to read, or even to project his own political ideas onto the readers. For these reasons alone, I feel that this source is an effective and reliable source to use for work, as long as the points being made are backed up by other ancient sources- whether they are contemporary or modern.

Reference List

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