

Alexander as Prototype: Autocracy and Civil War in Lucan's *Bellum Civile* 10.1–35

Bellum Civile, also known as *The Civil War* or *Pharsalia*, is an incomplete 10-book epic written by Lucan around 61-65 AD.¹ It concerns a specific event in Roman history: the civil war between the Roman Senate, led by Pompey the Great, and Julius Caesar, from Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon to the events in Alexandria in the fall of 48 b.c.² The final books, published after Lucan's death, display an outspoken hostility towards the Caesars. By foregrounding civil war and the dangers of one-man rule, Lucan's *Bellum Civile* exploits the epic tradition to compel readers to rethink Roman expansion and the notion of Roman identity.³ In comparing both Pompey and Caesar to Alexander the Great, Lucan explicitly criticises the Principate and, by extension, Emperor Nero.⁴

Lucan viewed civil war as destructive because Rome's strength was turned inward, leading to internal conflict rather than external conquest.⁵ The rise of the Principate is a result of this violence, replacing republican leadership with the power of a single ruler. Writing during Nero's increasingly autocratic and dissent-hostile regime, Lucan couldn't criticise the emperor directly. Instead, his critique of autocracy is conveyed through historical narrative.⁶

This commentary analyses Book 10, lines 1–35, situating the episode within its narrative and political context before methodically exploring how Lucan develops his critique of autocracy, ultimately condemning Alexander.

The book begins after the death of Pompey, who, after seeking refuge in Egypt after the defeat of his troops by Caesar at Pharsalia, is beheaded by Pharaoh Ptolemy. Caesar follows “Pompey's head, reached land and trod those fatal sands” (Luc.10.1-2). Rather than describing Caesar victoriously and dynamically travelling to Egypt, he is still in Pompey's shadow, chasing after him even in death.⁷

¹ Ahl, 1976, p. 39.

² Ahl, 1976, p. 42.

³ Reed, 2011, p. 21.

⁴ In doing so, he negates the foundational myth of Virgil's *Aeneid*; the word constraints of this essay prevent me from commenting upon this more directly.

⁵ Reed, 2011, p. 24.

⁶ Lucan's personal relationship with Nero deteriorated in the mid-60s AD; he was reportedly barred from public recitation around 64 AD and later implicated in the Pisonian conspiracy of 65 AD. Following the plot's discovery, Nero ordered his execution, and Lucan was forced to commit suicide at the age of twenty-five. (Luc.Ahl, 1976, p. 37.)

⁷ Leigh, 2009, p. 239.

Egypt, traditionally a safe haven from the global catastrophe of civil war (Luc. as in Plato's Timaeus), is fatal for Pompey, and also potentially fatal for Caesar on arrival as "his fortune and the destiny of guilty Egypt contended whether the realm of Lagus⁸ should be conquered by Roman arms, or the Memphian sword should rid the world of the victor's head as well as of the loser's" (Luc. 10.2-5).⁹ Fortuna replaces the traditional gods of Roman historical epics,¹⁰ suggesting that the gods' absence or indifference makes Caesar's triumph a product of chance rather than divine favour.¹¹

Ironically, it is the "shade of Magnus" (Luc. 10.6) that saves Caesar's life: "that the Roman people might not, even after the death of Pompey, love the Nile." (Luc. 10.6-8) Pompey's ghost continues to serve Rome, ensuring the outcome of Rome's civil war isn't influenced by foreign powers. Pompey protects Roman sovereignty and prevents Rome from becoming symbolically indebted to or dominated by the Nile. The reader is also reminded that Pompey and Caesar are kinsmen (Luc. 10.6),¹² underscoring how civil war fractures not only the state but also the fundamental bonds of family.

Although Lucan occasionally portrays Pompey in a more sympathetic light, he remains subject to comparison with Alexander, the exemplary model of one-man rule. Pompey was also driven by a personal hunger for power, and his military operations, such as his eastern campaigns, echo those of Alexander.¹³ For example, when Lucan refers to Pompey as "Magnus," this may serve a dual purpose: portraying him as greater than Caesar yet inherently connected to Alexander. Celotto contends that Pompey is considered the lesser evil compared with Caesar because he fails, implying that his lack of ruthless ambition, unlike Caesar's, leads to his defeat.¹⁴

Caesar travels to Alexandria and realises that the general population is hostile to Roman rule, "and that not for his gain had Magnus fallen" (Luc. 10.12-13). Tracy writes that this process of disillusionment mirrors Lucan's disillusionment with the Principate.¹⁵ Alexandria foreshadows imperial Rome, depicting a regime that appears powerful yet is inherently unstable, sustained by violence and tenuous loyalty.

⁸ Lagus is Ptolemy's father

⁹ Tracy, 2014, p. 11.

¹⁰ Reed, 2011, p. 25.

¹¹ Leigh, 2009, p. 246.

¹² Pompey is Caesar's son-in-law.

¹³ Tracy, 2014, p. 28.

¹⁴ Celotto, 2018, p. 342.

¹⁵ Tracy, 2014, p. 11.

Caesar shows no interest in the city's attractions but eagerly (Luc.cupide) descends into Alexander's tomb (Luc.10.17–19). This eagerness contrasts with his chance discovery of Hector's tomb during his visit to Troy (Luc.9.975–977), suggesting that Caesar does not identify with the Trojan moral and political ideal of kingship.¹⁶ Instead, he aligns more with Alexander, whose tyranny exemplifies Caesarian autocracy.¹⁷ The episode also recalls Alexander's visit to Achilles' tomb, further reinforcing the association between Caesar and Alexander.

From this point in the passage, Lucan launches into a fierce attack on Alexander the Great. (Luc.10.18–45). He does not mention him by name or epithet; as Ahl writes, "He is merely a creature of blood who devastated the world".¹⁸ He is the "Mad son of Macedonian Philip, the fortunate freebooter" (Luc.felix praedo)(Luc.10.20–21).¹⁹ Labelled *proles vaesana*, the 'mad offspring' of Philip, Alexander is reduced to an archetypal 'mad king' and precursor to subsequent tyrants.²⁰ The word *proles* can relate to either human or animal offspring, further dehumanising Alexander.²¹ As Celotto claims, Lucan clearly associates Alexander with Caesar, as the adjective *felix* and the phrase *fatis urgentibus actus* at line 30 indicate that Alexander's conquests were guided by Fate. Similarly, Caesar's victory, described as "felix" at 3.296, is claimed to have been determined by Fate at 3.392, 5.482, and 7.247.33.²²

Lucan points out that Alexander's global domination was only halted by his death, "that avenged the world" (Luc.10.19–21). As Alexander left no successor, his empire disintegrated after his death. By contrast, Caesar has a successor; therefore, his tyrannical ambitions are limitless, making him a more dangerous ruler.²³

Ahl claims, "The mere existence of a sanctified tomb for Alexander is repugnant to Lucan."²⁴ In contrast to Pompey's desecration,²⁵ the reverential entombment of Alexander is testimony to the continuing power of monarchic rule.²⁶ Indeed, at the time of the poem's publication, Alexander's tomb still stood, serving as a persistent symbol of the authority and endurance of the monarchy.²⁷ Lucan reinforces this point over several lines, emphasising its significance,

¹⁶ Hector functions in Virgil's *Aeneid* as the moral model and conveyor of Troy's destiny to Aeneas (Luc.*Aeneid* 2)

¹⁷ Bernstein, 2011, p. 267.

¹⁸ Ahl, 1976, p. 223.

¹⁹ In other translations, the "lucky bandit"

²⁰ Tracy, 2014, p.93.

²¹ Ahl, 1976, p. 223.

²² Celotto, 2018, p.337.

²³ Ahl, 1976, p. 224.

²⁴ Ahl, 1976, p. 223.

²⁵ Pompey's head is impaled on a stake and his body thrown into the sea.

²⁶ Ahl, 1976, pp. 223–224.

²⁷ Tracy, 2014, pp. 94–95.

before stating outright that Alexander was “born to teach this bad lesson to the world, that so many lands may obey one lord.” (Luc.10.26-28). Alexander is again presented as the clearest embodiment of one-man rule, world domination, and its destructive consequences, further demonstrated in the following lines.

Lucan writes that Alexander “left his own obscure realm of Macedonia; he spurned Athens, which his father had conquered” (Luc.10.28-29). Driven by a megalomaniac ambition that could not be satisfied by his own kingdom or his father’s conquests, Alexander embarked on a “wanton course of destruction through the human realm”.²⁸ “Mowing down mankind” (Luc.10.30-31) evokes the swift, sweeping ease of mass killing, indiscriminately in “the breast of every nation” (Luc.10.31-32).

Alexander’s destructive actions extended beyond humankind to the natural world itself, polluting the Euphrates and Ganges with human blood and serving as a “pestilence to earth” (Luc.10.32-33). The language is strikingly graphic and visceral, and recalls both Caesar’s pollution of the rivers of Thessaly in Book 7 (Luc.7.116, 7.700 and 7.789-90)²⁹ and the episode in the *Iliad* in which Achilles chokes the river Scamander with corpses.³⁰

Lucan clearly equates Caesar with Alexander in the lines: “thunderbolt that struck all peoples alike, a comet of disaster to mankind” (Luc.10.34-35). Caesar is also called a thunderbolt earlier in the poem (Luc.1.151.157). However, as Ahl points out, Caesar is worse than Alexander because his destructive force is aimed at his own homeland and fellow Romans.³¹ As Leigh observes, Lucan’s description of Alexander as *sidus iniquum gentibus*³² alludes to the dog-star simile in Homer’s *Iliad*, where Achilles’ approach is likened to a malignant star that brings fever and destruction.³³

In conclusion, Book 10.1–35 of *Bellum Civile* demonstrates how Lucan employs historical narrative to highlight the dangers of civil war and autocracy. The character of Alexander exemplifies a model of tyranny that reveals the ideological basis of the Principate. Alexander symbolises the point at which world conquest becomes linked to personal dominance, setting a precedent that many lands may justly obey a single ruler. This model corrupts Rome, and Lucan presents both Pompey and Caesar as shaped by its legacy. Pompey’s career had long

²⁸ Tracy, 2014, p. 92.

²⁹ Tracy, 2014, p. 117.

³⁰ Hom. Il. 21

³¹ Ahl, 1976, p. 224.

³² “A comet of disaster to all mankind”

³³ Leigh, 2009, p. 243.

invited comparison with Alexander, while Caesar's descent into the tomb confirms his conscious identification with the world-conqueror. Consequently, civil war is depicted as an inevitable outcome of Roman leaders aspiring to monarchic ideals.

For a Neronian audience, the implications would have been inescapable. By tracing the ideological roots of autocracy to Alexander, Lucan invites readers to recognise the persistence of that model in their current political landscape. The *Bellum Civile* implies that Rome's greatest disaster was not just civil war, but the acceptance of monarchy as the inevitable outcome of Roman power.

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