

Lucan's Suicidal Map of Rome

It is widely recognized that Lucan's epic *Bellum Civile* on the self-destruction of Rome and her people is intensely geographical, abounding in place catalogues and far-flung references to the limits of Roman empire. Yet at the center of it all, the poem places the city of Rome herself firmly within its epic gaze. However important Lucan's characters are to the story, it is the meaning of '*Roma*' that lies at the ideological heart of the epic, not only what she means but also what she *will* mean after the triumph of Caesar. Much scholarship has been done in recent years to advance our understanding of Lucan's meaningful use of geography, in particular articles by Spencer (2005) on the portrayal of Roman landscapes as ruins under the reign of Nero, Myers (2011) on the significance of boundary violation to destabilize Roman imperial geography, and Bexley (2009, 2013) on Caesar's displacement of Rome as the true center of the Roman world.

Building upon these studies that examine Lucan's unstable geography of empire, the aim of this paper is to focus our attention more narrowly on Rome's poetic topography, a facet of the poem's engagement with geography that has not yet received much attention. Finding inspiration in the model provided by Larmour and Spencer (2007), my goal is to draw Lucan's poetic map of Rome in a world engulfed in civil war. What actual places does he mention? Which parts of the city does he draw particular attention to? Which spaces emerge in the text and which stay submerged? A closer examination of Lucan's literary topography of Rome reveals unsettled landscapes defined by social contexts of fear, forgetfulness, dissolution, and self-destruction. A survey of Book 1 will suffice to show the pattern that is repeated throughout the rest of the epic.

The significance of *Roma* emerges at the beginning when she is directly addressed in the proem, the vocative literally trapped within her own immense love of unspeakable civil war

(*tantus amor belli tibi, Roma, nefandi*, 1.21) From this inauspicious beginning, it is notable that the first concrete mention of Rome's topography comes in reference to the founding fratricide of Romulus and Remus, Rome's original exemplum of civil war: the city's "first walls" (*primi muri*, 1.95) are soaked with a brother's blood, and in shocking contrast to the present civil war, that first internal conflict was fought over just the tiny little patch of ground of the Asylum on the Capitoline Hill (*exiguum dominos commisit asylum*, 1.97). A share of the blame falls on the people of Rome as well who routinely descended to base corruption in the elections on the Campus Martius (*annua venali referens certamina Campo*, 1.180). When the rumor of Caesar's approach hits the city, the terrified people abandon it in a mad rush (1.484-509), not even pausing to look back for a last time at the city they once loved (*nec...extremo tunc forsitan urbis amatae plenus abit visu*, 1.507-9). Fittingly, Lucan frames the people's rush to disassociate themselves from the city's topography with no mention of any specific places beyond an empty Curia. Nothing else is named, nothing else is remembered, other than an missing 'head' for Rome. The final episode of Book 1 focuses on the countless portents of doom, and once again the only geographical spaces within the city that Lucan highlights are nameless temple floors where offering collapse and the places in the heart of the city that paradoxically transform into the lairs of wild beasts (1.557-60), all while around the city's walls stalks a blazing, vengeful Fury (*ingens urbem cingebat Erinys*, 1.572). Throughout the text, Lucan depicts the city of Rome, quite literally encircled by the power of civil war, as a poetic landscape defined as a place disrupted, increasingly bereft of place, memory, and meaning.

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