

The Battle of Pharsalia in Literary Memory from Caesar to Lucan

During his narration of the Battle of Pharsalia, the Neronian poet Lucan makes the arresting claim that, while Rome has marked other days of defeat on the calendar (such as Cannae and Allia), “it has wanted to remain ignorant of *this* day” (*hunc voluit nescire diem*, 7.411). Since we know that it appeared on the *fasti*, to what extent was Caesar’s most important victory in fact remembered or forgotten? This paper aims to address this question by surveying the various appearances of Pharsalia in literature between the actual battle waged in Thessaly in 48 BCE and Lucan’s own literary memorial to the battle. Recent years has seen welcome attention paid to Roman self-reflection on the civil wars collectively (e.g. Breed, Damon, and Rossi 2010), but no study has been made on Pharsalia’s particular place in Roman memory. A study of the ways in which the Roman world remembered (or neglected) Pharsalia can prove illuminating since that battle, while not the final conflict in the civil war, did mark the decisive turning point both for Caesar and the Roman world (Vell. Pat. 2.52.3, Plut. *Ant.* 8.3, Dio 41.55.1).

Social memory is naturally path-dependent, and thus already-existing associations with Thessaly and Pharsalus—in particular the Gigantomachy (Ambühl 2016), the homeland of Achilles (Cat. 64.37, Paus. 10.13.5), and the legacy of Macedon (Cat. 64.324)—influenced subsequent framing of the Battle of Pharsalia as a cataclysmic struggle between mighty warriors. Oral narratives were the first vehicle for the creation of social memory surrounding the battle, but its earliest surviving mediations appear in Caesar’s *Bellum Civile*, whose memorable literary portrayal of Pharsalia stands as testimony to the divinely-favored victory of the better Roman leader (Peer 2015), and in Cicero, who offers the first Roman lament over what he recalls (after Caesar is already dead) as *illa calamitosissima pugna Pharsalia* (*Phil.* 14.23). We regrettably do

not have the Pharsalian narratives of Asinius Pollio and Livy, but their treatments further established the battle as a part of Roman cultural memory. Oral *exempla* and rhetorical exercises also provided a framework for maintaining and shaping the memory of this decisive battle, as models from Valerius Maximus (e.g. 1.5.6, 4.5.5) and Seneca the Elder (*Cont.* 5.1.1, *Suas.* 6.3) attest.

The most striking feature of the poetic tradition regarding Pharsalia was its conscious pairing of the memory of that battle with the subsequent Battle of Philippi (42 BCE). Vergil was the first to do so (*Geo.* 1.490), followed by Ovid in whose *Metamorphoses* Jupiter prophecies that under the future Augustus “Pharsalia will feel him, and Emathian Philippi will again reek with slaughter” (*Met.* 16.823-4). Finding inspiration in post-civil war readings of Catullus 64, with its tale of a Pharsalian marriage that ends with a warning of potential civil war (Nelis 2012), such a conflation of these two battles illustrates the extent to which the repetition of civil war at Philippi profoundly shaped social memory of the earlier Pharsalia. Both battles were waged in northern Greece, both featured a general named Caesar, and in both the side that claimed to represent Republican *libertas* was defeated.

Such a survey reveals that Pharsalia was monumentalized in poetry and remembered in historical and rhetorical prose in terms that both celebrated the victory of Caesar *and* also lamented the terrible tragedy of Roman civil war. It was therefore clearly not forgotten during the Principate. Indeed, the battle’s continuing mentions in Velleius Paterculus (2.52), Pliny the Elder (e.g. 5.58, 7.94), and Seneca (*Epist.* 71.8) suggests at first the opposite of Lucan’s assertion that Rome has wanted to remain ignorant of Pharsalia. In the context, however, of an epic that fronts that very battle as Rome’s true ‘doomsday’ (Joseph 2017), I will argue in closing that Lucan is claiming not that the battle itself was forgotten but rather that Caesarian Rome actively

wanted to forget its truer traumatic meaning: Pharsalia should not be counted a Roman victory but rather the foundation for Rome's continual self-defeat.

Bibliography

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