

Noster Oceanus: Atlantic and Mediterranean in Lucan

This paper demonstrates that Lucan, in his description of the geology of the western Mediterranean basin nearest to the Strait of Gibraltar, co-opts the term *Oceanus* for portions of the Mediterranean. This is an unusual application of “Ocean,” and so this paper also addresses the significance of Lucan’s geographical terminology and the mythical and natural philosophical reasons for it.

Though other Latin authors did use *Oceanus* of specific bodies of water (*TLL* vol. IX 2, 406, 43-60), Lucan is alone in transferring the term to the Mediterranean (*TLL* vol. IX 2, 406, 60-63). This transference occurs when Lucan describes the geography of Spain and of Africa, specifically Iberian rivers that empty into the Mediterranean and that are the locus of the Spanish floods in *BC* 4 in Lucan’s account seem to flow into *Oceanus* (*Cinga rapax, vetitus fluctus et litora cursu / Oceani pepulisse tuo; nam gurgite mixto / qui praestat terris aufert tibi nomen Hiberus*, 4.21-23; *reppuli aestus / fortior Oceani*, 4.102-103). Lucan’s African geography near the far western town of Gades likewise seems to categorize the Mediterranean as *Oceanus* (*vasti plaga fervida regni / distinet Oceanum zonaeque exusta calentis*, 4.674-75; *unde Europa fugit Libyen et litora flexu / Oceano fecere locum*, 9.415-16). While Lucan’s other uses of *Oceanus* clearly refer to the large, connected body of water identifiable as the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and a few of their offshoots, these particular instances most likely describe portions of the Mediterranean sea instead.

Though Lucan’s youth and poetic inexperience have been cited as the causes of “errors” in geography (Mendell 1942; cf. Horsfall 1985), this paper instead argues that Lucan’s geographical conflations and linguistic innovation can be read as deliberate (cf. Masters 1992, 154; Bexley 2009; Pogorzelski 2011). In this way, they draw on mythical accounts of geological

causae (BC 9.415-16; cf. Ennius fr. 302, Cicero *De natura deorum* 3.24, Pliny *Historia naturalis* 3.3-5) and natural philosophical theories of meteorological phenomena (Seneca *Naturales quaestiones* 3.27, 6.32.4) to emphasize the global cataclysm that exists in Lucan's poem on levels both literal (the Spanish floods) and figurative (the programmatic apocalypse simile at BC 1.72-82). Spain and Africa are two regions whose descriptions in Lucan's text are the most spectacular in terms of natural disaster and natural hazards, and thus in these locations, the reversal of the natural order is more clear. The conflation of *Oceanus* with the Mediterranean signals a confusion in the world brought on by civil conflict and, more specifically, allows Lucan the opportunity to revisit the ancient cataclysm that formed the Mediterranean sea. The trauma of Ocean bursting through the pillars of Hercules and creating a new sea, whose tides rival those of the Atlantic itself just to the west (*primus ab oceano caput exeris Atlanteo, / Core, movens aestus*, 5.598-99; cf. 4.102-3), is a geological echo to the new trauma of civil war bursting into the wider world in Lucan's poem.

Bibliography

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