

Centurions, Caesar, and Swords to the Face: The Curious Case of Crastinus

Caesarian scholarship has seen a revival in recent years (Grillo and Krebs, 2018; Westall, 2018; Grillo, 2012; Damon and Batstone, 2006). It has explored Caesar as both *actor* and *auctor*, well-versed in narrative structure and deliberate with his rhetorical choices and diction. Caesar's centurions, however, have not received much attention, despite his emphasis on the importance of these career soldiers. In this paper, I discuss the representation of the centurion Caius Crastinus, both in Caesar and later authors, to examine the significance of his role in Caesar's *Bellum Civile* and the reception of Crastinus' character by others. I argue that the Crastinus episode brings out the cultural conceptions about centurions in the Roman Empire and that his speech and death deserve closer inspection.

First, I discuss how Caesar's description of Crastinus, before and after the battle of Pharsalus, intentionally presents him as echoing the language of Caesar's justification for invading Italy. Caesar as *auctor* gives Crastinus a voice to speak the will of Caesar as *actor*, thereby justifying his actions by having them affirmed by an experienced centurion. Before the battle, Crastinus rallies his troops to restore the *dignitas* stripped from Caesar and to recover the *libertas* lost at the hand of Caesar's enemies: *et ille suam dignitatem et nos nostram libertatem recuperabimus* (BC 3.91). Scholars have noticed the echoes between Crastinus' speech and Caesar's declaration of war in 1.7 (Brown, 1999; Krebs, 2018), yet Crastinus' status as a centurion has often been ignored. I argue that Caesar specifically makes a centurion the defining moment in his narrative of his cause.

Second, I examine Crastinus' death and Caesar's reaction to his heroism. Caesar describes Crastinus' death as reflecting the ideal *virtus* that Caesar expected from his soldiers.

He describes Crastinus before the battle as a man with singular virtue, *vir singulari virtute* (BC 3.91). After the battle, when Crastinus' body is found with a sword struck through his mouth, Caesar claims that he had the most excellent virtue, *excellentissimam virtutem*, and he judged that Crastinus had most effectively earned his respect, *optimeque eum de se meritum* (BC 3.99). I argue that Caesar's use of superlatives, his verb choice, and the specific description of Crastinus' death, contribute to his portrait of the ideal soldier.

Finally, I compare how later sources represent Crastinus as a paradigm of Caesarian loyalty. This quality, however, is not always positive. Appian, Plutarch, Lucan, and Florus highlight Crastinus' actions as indicative of loyalty taken to extremes. Lucan's scathingly criticizes Crastinus (BC 7.470-4) while Appian describes Caesar as constructing a personal burial mound for the fallen centurion (App. BC 2.82). Plutarch depicts Crastinus' speech as prophetic (Plut. *Caes.* 44; *Pomp.* 71) while Florus emphasizes the ferocity of Crastinus' actions (Flor. *Epit.* 2.13). Specifically, Florus comments on Crastinus' quality of rage, *rabies*, which is also used by Silius Italicus to describe another "heroic" yet cannibalistic centurion (Sil. *Pun.* 6.43). These sources demonstrate the metaphorical and symbolic nature of Crastinus but they also reflect larger conceptions about the importance and impact of the Roman centurion in the mentality of the Roman elite.

This paper offers a new interpretation of a single historical figure across multiple sources over a long period of time. I argue that Caesar presents Crastinus in a particular light of heroism and *virtus* to emphasize the moral high-ground of his war. Lucan picks up on Caesar's deliberate portrayal and inverts it to underscore the bloodshed of Pharsalus. Florus and Plutarch both choose to highlight the combat ability of Crastinus. In this way, I suggest, Crastinus becomes a

litmus test for literate conceptions of centurions. This paper contributes to the wider question of the role of the centurion in literature.

Bibliography

Batstone, W and Damon, C. 2006. *Caesar's Civil War*. Oxford.

Brown, R. 1999. "Two Caesarian Battle-Descriptions: A Study in Contrast," *CJ*94.4 pp.329-57

Grillo, L. 2012. *The Art of Caesar's Bellum Civile: Literature, Ideology, and Community*.
Cambridge.

Grillo, L and Krebs, C. 2018. *The Cambridge Companion to the Writings of Julius Caesar*.
Cambridge.

Westall, R. 2018. *Caesar's Civil War: Historical Reality and Fabrication*. Brill.