

Lovers of War and Wisdom: Platonic Elements in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*

This paper examines features of Platonic thought in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. I argue that Lucan appropriated Plato's account of the fall of Atlantis from the *Timaeus* as a literary model in his effort to comment on Rome's position as an imperial power. This comparative analysis seeks to complement recent studies which situate Lucan's epic as a subversive critique of the Neronian regime and of Rome's idealized future as hegemon in the Mediterranean and beyond (Holmes 1999, Barrenechea 2010, and Pogorzelski 2011).

Scholarship has long acknowledged Lucan's use of Stoicism in his portrayal of Rome as an unstable world power (Lapidge 1979 and Manolaraki 2011). What has been less well appreciated, however, is his synthesis of Platonic cosmology with Stoic elements in a network of philosophical and literary allusions.

My point of departure is the Nile Digression in Book 10 of the *Bellum Civile*. At the beginning of Book 10, Caesar reveals his new ambitions in a conversation with the Egyptian priest, Acoreus. Caesar's desire for conquest is expressed in his request for knowledge about Egypt, specifically the Nile. He attempts to persuade the priest to share his knowledge since Egyptian priests in an earlier time instructed a foreigner – Plato of Athens (10.181-83). Finally, he requests information regarding the source of the Nile with a promise to give up civil war.

In Book 10 Lucan leaves clues for his readers to consult Plato's *Timaeus* and compare the account of Atlantis with Caesar's designs for global domination. Lucan has his Caesar mention Plato by name and via Acoreus he later references the "Creator and Demiurge of things" (*creator atque opifex rerum*, 10.266-67), which are terms Plato uses to describe the being who organized the cosmos in the *Timaeus*. Alone these references would be tenuous links to a specific dialogue

of Plato, but other parallels between the two texts point toward a conscious intertextual engagement.

Plato begins the *Timaeus* with the mythical story of the fall of Atlantis. Plato's interlocutor relates how Solon visited Egypt in order to learn about antiquity from Egyptian priests (22a, b). A priest then explains that humanity suffers cyclical annihilation, caused by either fire or water. In either case, the Nile serves as the salvation of Egyptians and thereby allows them to preserve knowledge about the world, which they write down and store in their shrines (22c-23b). The priest then relates an event in which even Egypt almost lost knowledge. Atlantis, an advanced civilization west of the Mediterranean, invaded eastward and sought to conquer Europe and Asia, every region "within the straits" (25b). Athens ultimately stood alone and repelled the invaders, but succumbed with their enemies to a cosmic earthquake and flood which submerged both armies and reconfigured the world, except Egypt.

In both Lucan and Plato a foreigner visits Egypt and requests instruction from priests. Both texts relate how an invading empire from the west surges eastward and attempts to dominate the rest of the world. Such geographical symbolism in Lucan is well established in his poem's contrast between Rome as the West (4.351-53) and Egypt as the East (1.683-84). Lucan invites the reader to associate Caesar, and by extension the Rome of the early 60s CE, with Plato's Atlantis – a formidable yet doomed world power. Lucan also, I suggest, engages with the *Timaeus* on a metapoetic level in that his Caesar seems to have read his Plato and attempts to succeed where Atlantis failed. If in the *Timaeus* the invading empire fell because of a worldwide catastrophe in which only Egypt was spared because of the Nile, Lucan's Caesar seeks to learn the sources of the Nile so he can secure himself from potential setbacks in his quest for world

domination. Lucan, the philosopher-poet, ultimately withholds this knowledge from his Caesar who, like Atlantis, is doomed to fail. In Lucan's view, the Rome of his day should take notice.

Bibliography

Barrenechea, F. (2010). 'Didactic Aggressions in the Nile Excursus of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*'.

The American Journal of Philology. Vol. 3, No. 2 (259-284).

Holmes, N. (1999). 'Nero and Caesar: Lucan 1.33-66'. *CP* Vol. 94, No. 1 (75-81).

Lapidge, M. (1979). 'Lucan's Imagery of Cosmic Dissolution'. *Hermes* 107 (344-70).

Manolaraki, E. 2011. "Noscendi Nilum Cupido: the Nile Digression in Book 10." In *Brill's*

Companion to Lucan, ed. P. Asso. Leiden: Boston (153-182).

Pogorzelski, R. (2011). 'Orbis Romanus: Lucan and the Limits of the Roman World'.

Transactions of the American Philological Association, Vol. 141, No. 1 (143-170).