



[Lucan, The Civil War I.1-32](#)

Lucan's apostrophe to Roman citizens for having allowed the civil war between Caesar and Pompey to happen.

Name of the author: Lucan

Date: 59 CE to 65 CE

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: The Civil War

Reference: I.1-32

Commentary:

The civil war between Caesar and Pompey from 49-45 BCE is the central theme of Lucan's *Bellum civile* (*The Civil War*). This epic reflects upon the end of the Republic and the way Rome degenerated due to the Romans' weakness, their inclination towards internal dissent, and the ambition of men like Caesar (Toohey, *Reading Epic*, p. 166-167). Lucan had been close to the emperor Nero, at least before his disfavour during the 60s CE, but he was very critical of the principate. In *Bellum civile* he wanted to show that a political system emanating from a civil war and the victory of a tyrant could not be a satisfactory regime. This text is an excerpt from the beginning of the first book. Its date has been debated, as many scholars have isolated books I to III from the others, due to the presence in book I of an invocation to Nero, which has led scholars to claim that the first books might have been written before Lucan fell-out with the emperor in the beginning of the 60s CE (Toohey, *Reading Epic*, p. 168). Other scholars, however, have argued that there is a real "consistency" in Lucan's thoughts throughout his work. If the first three books do not express the same degree of criticism towards the imperial system as Book VII, which describes the battle of Pharsalus, some themes as the degeneration of the Empire, the condemnation of civil war and the characterization of Caesar as the tyrant who founded the principate can be found throughout the work (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 6-7).

The text begins with a proem, made of seven lines, which clearly recalls the proem of the *Iliad* and that of the *Aeneid*. Yet, Lucan's proem is very different from that of Homer, since it has no unique hero and there is no glorious promise (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 97). It is also very different from the *Aeneid's* proem – which forecasts the sufferings and the final success of the hero Aeneas – because the hope of a rebirth of the Roman state is not explicitly mentioned. If the proem of the *Aeneid* foretells a linear temporal and spatial progress for Aeneas, the *Bellum civile* is closed on itself, focused on the destructions caused by the civil wars (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 94-95; Casali, "The *Bellum Civile*," p. 83-85). Even if Lucan's message and intentions are very different from those of Virgil, Sergio Casali has shown that Lucan uses many expressions and literary constructions from Virgil, *Georgic* I.489-492 (dealing with the civil war up to Caesar's death) and from Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.826-835 (dealing with the civil war between Caesar and Pompey) (see Casali, "The *Bellum Civile*," p. 85-86). The proem of *Bellum civile* begins with the word *bellum* (v. 1) and with an allusion to Pharsalus, since the Emathian plains referred to Thessaly, the region where this battle took place in 48 BCE (*Emathia* is also used in Virgil, *Georgic* I.492). From the very beginning of the text, Lucan highlights the fact that this war is "worse than civil wars" (*bella...plus quam civilia*, v. 1). This sentence has been variously understood. Some scholars consider that Lucan argues that it is not only a war between some political groups, or involving the whole Roman population, it is also a familial strife between Caesar and his son-in-law Pompey (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 101). Three elements might corroborate such a view: the allusion to the breakdown of the *foedus* of the *regnum*, "of the pact of tyranny", referring to the dissolution of the first triumvirate; the idea that the enemy armies opposed members of the same families, *cognatasque acies* (v. 4) and the fact that they had the same weaponry (v. 6-7). However, Paul Martin has convincingly shown that Lucan may have insisted on the special nature of this civil war because it was the first civil war which implied the whole world. Actually, the confrontation between Caesar and Pompey is presented in the poem as a fight for the domination of the world (see I.285; III.296-297), but also as a ultimate clash between the two parts of the Roman world: the West versus the East. Thus, it could be possible to understand the expression *bella...plus quam civilia* as a reference to the fact that the conflict between Caesar and Pompey was not only a civil war, it was also a foreign war implying the entire world (Florus understands the nature and the scope of this war in this way, see Florus, *Epitome of Roman History* II.13.3-4; see Martin, "La 'barbarisation,'" p. 243).



Then, Lucan uses a very striking image of the “mighty people attacking its own guts with victorious sword-hand” (v. 2-3). This passage clearly recalls the interdiction expressed by Anchises to his sons to use their vigour against “their country’s very vitals” (*in viscera vertite*) ([Virgil, *Aeneid* VI.832-833](#)), and also Calpurnius Siculus’s description of Bellona, in chains, practicing autophagy ([Calpurnius Siculus, *Eclogue* I.47-48](#)). Lucan emphasizes here one of the main themes of his poem: due to its self-destructive nature, the civil war was the equivalent of a suicide of the whole Roman state. However, Sergio Casali rightly remarks that whereas in the *Aeneid*, Anchises addresses his prayer to Pompey and Caesar so that they would not “stir up the civil war,” Lucan does not focus his accusations against the two leaders only but against the “mighty people,” the whole *populus romanus*, as well (see Casali, “The *Bellum Civile*,” p. 86). The last important point expressed in the proem is that this civil strife was not only a Roman issue, but also a universal war (v. 5-6). As Micah Myers writes, the onset of the Roman civil war coincides with “the end of peace anywhere on earth” (see Myers, “Center and Periphery,” p. 402). A comparison of this passage with the rest of the text makes clear that there is a paradox between the idea that Rome enjoyed a universal domination – so that, when a civil strife divided the Roman people, it was the whole universe which was waging war – and that there were still many foreign enemies to submit. As Randall Pogorzelski rightly says: “It seems that Roman claims of world domination meant that the world was available for military action rather than that the world had already been subdued by the army” (see Pogorzelski, “Orbis Romanus,” p. 148).

After the proem, in lines 8 to 32, Lucan develops an apostrophe to Rome. It begins with an interesting question: “What [was] this excessive freedom with the sword – to offer Latian blood to hated nations?” (v. 8-9). First, it has to be noticed that the idea that Roman civil blood is an “offertory to Rome’s past and present enemies” is a main theme of *Bellum civile*. It also clearly recalls Horace who, in [Epode VII](#), wrote that enough “Latin blood” (*Latinus sanguis*) has been shed over (v. 3), and that this civil blood fulfilled “Parthians’ prayers” (v. 9-10) (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 114). Another reference to the *Latinus sanguis* can be found in Horace, *Odes* II.1.29, a poem in which the idea that Rome offered herself to her enemies, here the dead Jugurtha, is also expressed. With this question and the development from verses 10 to 20, Lucan wants to prove that, instead of waging internal war, the Roman people should have dedicated their efforts to fight their real enemies. As Sergio Casali rightly analyses, the implicit opposition made by Lucan between the “legitimacy of foreign war,” here embodied by the triumph (v. 12), and “the impiety of intestine conflict” is a theme which is also present in Horace, especially in *Epode* VII.1-12 and *Odes* I.2.21-24 (see Casali, “The *Bellum Civile*,” p. 87). Then, Lucan lists various nations which should have been subjected. Among them, the first one is Parthia, embodied by Babylon (v. 10) and not by Ctesiphon – even if it was the real capital – probably to evoke the campaign of Alexander the Great (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 115). Then, Lucan recalls that the most urgent mission for Rome at that time was to avenge the death of Crassus (v. 12), that is the Roman general who lost his standards during the battle against the Parthians, near Carrhae, in 53 BCE. This passage clearly echoes Horace, *Odes* I.2.21-23, in which Horace regrets that citizens did not wage a war against Persia, a regret which was also a message addressed to Augustus, who was responsible to avenge the Roman people (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 114). However, Lucan omits several things: first, the fact that in 38 BCE Publius Ventidius Bassus celebrated his “short-lived victory” over the Parthians with a triumph praised by many authors as a vengeance for Carrhae; second, that in 20 BCE, Augustus got back the lost Roman standards. With these omissions, the poet wants to stress the catastrophic consequences of the civil war during the 40’s BCE, without mentioning “subsequent Roman affairs” (the Parthian case became problematic anew under Nero’s reign, from 62 CE onward; see Pogorzelski, “Orbis Romanus,” p. 146, 149). Then, Lucan expresses his regrets that all the Roman citizens who died in the civil conflicts could not have been useful to conquer foreign territories or seas (v. 13-14). To prove how the potential of Rome’s expansion could have been huge, Lucan describes that it could have reached the four points of the compass (v. 15-18). As Paul Roche rightly analyses, the aim of this geographical survey made by Lucan was to prove “the potentially limitless geographical expansion of a concordant Roman state” (see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 119), a forecasting which was originally exposed through Jupiter’s prophecy, in the first book of the *Aeneid*, about the *imperium sine fine*, “the empire without end” ([Virgil, *Aeneid* I.278-279](#)). But the civil war led to the failure of Rome’s potential for spreading all around the world.

The examples of the Chinese (*Seres*, v. 19), of inhabitants of Armenia (*Araxes*, v 19), and of the region close to the Nile’s source (v. 20) given by Lucan to prove that Rome could have extend his power to some very remote regions, were not chosen at random. They referred to regions which were concerned by Nero’s diplomatic and military policy: the expedition against Armenia which started in 59 CE but failed in 62 CE, the missions of exploration in Ethiopia (corresponding to actual Sudan) at the beginning of 60s CE (maybe between 61 and 63 CE; see Coleman, *M. Valerii*, p. 267-269), and the submission of various countries bordering the Black Sea at the beginning of the 60s CE to prepare the later expedition to the Caspian Gates, which could have opened the way to China (if this interpretation is true, these events would prove that the first book of *Bellum civile* may have been written by 62 CE; see Grimal, “Is the Eulogy,” p. 61-62). Thus, Lucan wanted to claim that the Roman world’s



conquest was progressing and, implicitly, that Nero “was attempting to complete it” with varying successes (see Pogorzelski, “Orbis Romanus,” p. 150-151).

After this geographical survey, Lucan makes a strange assessment: if Rome has such a love (*amor*) for war, it should first submit the whole universe, that is it should wage wars against her former enemies, and after it could turn her weapons against herself (v. 21-23). As Sergio Casali rightly remarks, this passage echoes Virgil, *Aeneid* IV.229-231, when Jupiter prophesies that a man, perhaps Aeneas and behind him Augustus, “will bring all the world beneath his laws.” Writing the verse “only when you have brought the entire world beneath the laws of Latium” (v. 22), Lucan had probably the Virgilian precedent in mind and he may have wanted to show that Jupiter’s prophecy realized neither in his time, nor in the time of Augustus (see Casali, “The *Bellum Civile*,” p. 88-89). The allusion to the self-destruction of Rome when it would have reached its culmination, appears as a grotesque forecasting, very far from the Virgilian prophecy of universal domination.

To prove that these civil wars had been disastrous events creating deep and lengthy perturbations, Lucan describes in a hyperbolic way that, during his own time, the Italian cities were still abandoned, destroyed and unoccupied (v. 24-29). The poet ends his apostrophe to Roman citizens by saying that the “self-inflicted carnage of Caesar and Pompey” surpassed the disastrous actions of Rome’s worst foreign enemies, Pyrrhus and the *Poenus* Hannibal (v. 30-31; Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 127). The final sentence appears as a gloomy maxim which recalls that only an internal war between members of the same citizenship or of the same families can produce such a carnage. As Paul Roche rightly notices, in this final assessment as in the description of the ruined Italy, the poet uses the present tense (*sedent*, v. 32; see Roche, *Lucan, De Bello Civili*, p. 129). Nevertheless, it seems hard to believe that many Italian cities were still unoccupied or destroyed at Lucan’s time because of the destructions of the civil war. By using the present tense and by claiming that the disastrous effects of the civil war could still be felt, Lucan may have wanted to give more weight to his poetic lamentation, and to insist on the idea that the political regime, which appeared after these civil wars, still existed at his time. By using the present tense at the end of his apostrophe, Lucan may have also wanted to focus the attention on the present emperor, Nero, whose role was to surpass this gloomy period and the initial failures of the principate.

Keywords in the original language:

- [acies](#)
- [amor](#)
- [Araxes](#)
- [Ausonius](#)
- [Babylon](#)
- [barbarus](#)
- [bellum civile](#)
- [civis](#)
- [clades](#)
- [Crassus](#)
- [cruor](#)
- [ferrum](#)
- [foedus](#)
- [furor](#)
- [gens](#)
- [Hesperia](#)
- [hostis](#)
- [Italia](#)
- [Latia lex](#)
- [Latium](#)
- [nefas](#)
- [Nilus](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [pelagus](#)
- [Poenus](#)
- [populus](#)



- [potens](#)
- [Pyrrhus](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [Roma](#)
- [sanguis](#)
- [Seres](#)
- [terra](#)
- [triumphus](#)
- [tropaeum](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [viscus](#)
- [vulnus](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Caesar](#)
- [civil war](#)
- [Parthians](#)
- [Pompey](#)
- [Roman expansion](#)
- [Roman hegemony](#)
- [Roman people](#)
- [Roman Republic](#)
- [Rome's decay](#)
- [suicide](#)
- [tyranny](#)

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