



[Lucan, The Civil War II.568-595](#)

After Caesar's progression in Italy and Pompey's retreat to Capua, Lucan imagines the speech that Pompey would have addressed to his soldiers before his departure for Brundisium.

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: II.568-595

Commentary:

The civil war between Caesar and Pompey from 49-45 BCE, is the central theme of Lucan's *Bellum civile*. This epic initiates general reflections upon the end of the Republic and the way Rome degenerated due to the weakness of the Romans, their inclination towards internal dissent, and the ambitions of men such as Caesar (Toohey, *Reading Epic*, p. 166-167). Even if he had been close to the emperor Nero, until his disfavour during the 60s CE, Lucan is 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 second book of the poem. Lucan was deliberately imprecise about the location and the date of the scene, but it took place after Caesar's taking of Corfinium, on February 21, 49 BCE, and before Pompey's withdrawal to Brundisium. This text is the last part of a speech of Pompey to his soldiers. The portrayal of Pompey made by Lucan is less laudatory than the depiction of an author like Livy. Actually, Lucan insists on Pompey's successive withdrawals and on his obsession with Caesar (Fantham, *Lucan*, p. 32). Actually, whereas he was attempting to rally the soldiers to his cause, Lucan's Pompey uses critical arguments and bad faith to despise Caesar's military victories (v. 568-575). He insists on the length of the Gallic war which lasted for "various *lustra*" (that is more than ten years), and "a generation" (*aetas*, v. 569). Pompey voluntarily exaggerates the length of the Gallic war and does not say a word about Caesar's victory. Then, Pompey alludes to military operations which had not been real military successes of Caesar: the operations led in 55 BCE to bridge the Rhine and to fight the Sugambri (v. 570), and the expedition in Britain in 55-54 BCE (v. 571-572). Pompey ends his critic of Caesar's actions by emphasizing their negative consequences on the Romans: the rumour of his invasion led the population to arms before their escape. As Elaine Fantham rightly analyzes, the image of the *Urbs armata*, the "Rome in weapons" (v. 574) showed how Caesar perturbed Rome's fundamental laws, as weapons were totally forbidden inside the *Urbs* (Fantham, *Lucan*, p. 191).

Next, Pompey praises his major commands in a way that fits in perfectly with the Pompeian triumphal ideology (v. 576-582). Jackie Murray writes that "Lucan's Pompey represents his accomplishments in cosmic terms" (Murray, "Shipwrecked," p. 69). Actually, by insisting on his victories which enabled him to establish his entire domination on earth, Pompey claims that, through his standards, he acted like the sun and controlled all the deep (v. 574) – the allusion to the *pontus*, the deep, contrasts with the allusion to the North Sea, associated with Caesar's operations in Britain, which was presented as a sort of "puddle of shifting tides" (v. 571-572; Fantham, *Lucan*, p. 191). Pompey goes on with this cosmic vocabulary and praises the quickness of his territorial conquests, which are thus presented as challenging the moon itself since they lasted for less than two months (v. 577; Murray, "Shipwrecked," p. 69). Then, Pompey presents chronologically his major commands, and begins with the operations led in 67 BCE against the Cilician pirates (v. 578-579), and his victory over Mithridates of Pontus, in 66-64 BCE (v. 580-582). Lucan's Pompey compares his victory to that of Sulla and claims that he was more successful. Actually, in 88-87 BCE, after Mithridates's invasions of Roman Asia Minor and Greece, Sulla led some operations to free Greek territories. However, his victory was incomplete and Mithridates remained a real threat for Rome in Asia. In 66 BCE, Pompey received a command to wage war against Mithridates. After the conclusion of an alliance between Pompey and the king of Parthia, Mithridates fled first to Colchis and then to the Crimean Bosphorus (v. 580). In 65-64 BCE, Pompey's campaigns in the Pontus were successful, and after he led a campaign in Syria and in Judea, his last operation was crowned by the taking of Jerusalem. Thus, Lucan echoes



a main message of Pompey's triumphal ideology: these eastern victories symbolize the fact that Pompey had so expanded the boundaries of the Roman empire that Asia had become the centre of this Empire (Murray, "Shipwrecked," p. 69).

Lucan's Pompey goes on with this idea, and in the last part of his speech he insists on the huge dimensions of the territories controlled by him (v. 583-595). First, he begins with a classical hyperbolic statement: his conquests led the Roman empire to reach the boundaries of the known world. To assert the reality of his universal domination, Pompey claims that his victories organized the four cardinal axes of the universe. First, he distinguished the North (*Arctos*, the Bear), which is said to watch Pompey's victories on the Phasis, the main river of the Colchis (v. 585-586). As Elaine Fantham rightly suggests, Pompey refers here to his victories over the people of Colchis, during his campaign against Mithridates in 65 BCE, but he had submitted people located further North. The highlight on the eastern shore of the Black Sea was probably a deliberate choice, as the evocation of this region deeply linked with the Argonauts' journey (mentioned v. 591 with the allusion to the Colchians and the golden fleece) was probably more consistent with the epic tone of Pompey's speech (Fantham, *Lucan*, p. 193; Murray, "Shipwrecked," p. 69-70). Then, to refer to the South, Pompey mentions Egypt and Syene (Aswan) in Upper Egypt. This allusion seems strange, because Pompey went to this region just before his death in 48 BCE. The reference to Egypt can be explained by the fact that Pompey and Ptolemy XII Auletes had a patron-client relationship, and by the fact that in Lucan's time, Nero had recently led operations towards the source of the Nile (see [Lucan, The Civil War I.1-32](#)). Lucan's Pompey then refers to the far west by a cosmic and hyperbolic allusion: the *occasus*, that is the west, and the Hesperian Baetis, that is the Guadalquivir, "feared his control" (v. 588-589). The choice of Baetica as the symbol of the far western territories of Earth can be explained by the fact that Lucan came from this region. Second, in 55 BCE, Pompey received, for five years, the command of the two Spanish regions, the *Hispania citerior* and *ulterior*. He ruled them through legates until the open conflict with Caesar in 49 BCE. *Hispania ulterior*, and especially the region which will then become the province of Baetica, remained hostile to Julius Caesar until the battle of Munda (17th march, 45 BCE) and the taking of Urso, when Pompey's sons had been defeated (Le Roux, *La péninsule*, p. 36-38).

Next, Lucan's Pompey ends his listing of the cardinal axes by mentioning that Roman domination spread thanks to his military campaigns in the far east, here embodied by a series of Eastern peoples (v. 590-594). He starts his enumeration with the Arabs (v. 590), a probable allusion to the victory of a Pompeian legate over some Arab tribes in Mont Amanus in 64 BCE, and to the submission of the Nabataeans (Fantham, *Lucan*, p. 194-195). Next he mentions the Heniochi, a people of the Black Sea who were neighbours of the Colchians (v. 591); the Colchians, submitted after the flee of Mithridates in 65 BCE (v. 591); the Cappadocians, whose king Ariobarzanes I of Cappadocia became a client-king of Rome (v. 592); the Judeans, submitted after Pompey's taking of Jerusalem in 63 BCE (v. 592; see the explanations below). Pompey's list ends with the "soft Sophene" (v. 593), a region of Armenia characterised by his political instability since it was first given by the king Tigranes the Great to his son, Tigranes the younger, due to Pompey's pressure. Tigranes the younger ruled Sophene for one year, and Pompey deposed him and ordered that the region go back to Tigranes the Great. Finally, he adds the Armenians, whose king Tigranes the Great yielded after Pompey's taking of Artaxata in 66 BCE (v. 594); and the Cilicians, here represented by the mountain of the Taurus (v. 594) – this passage could refer to the submission of the pirates which came from this region.

Among this list, the way Lucan's Pompey presents Judea is very interesting: *dedita sacris incerti Iudaea dei*, "Judea devoted to rites of unknown god" (v. 592-593). The use of the expression *incertus deus* (litt.: uncertain, not well-defined god) by Lucan, to refer to the god of the Jews, had been explained by the fact that the poet may have been inspired by a passage, now lost, of Livy dealing with the god of the Jews. This hypothesis is based on a scholium on *Bellum civile* II.592-593 which mentions: *Livius de Iudaeis: "Hierosolymis fanum cuius deorum sit non nominant, neque ullum ibi simulacrum est, neque enim esse dei figuram putant"*; "Livy on the Jews: 'As to the temple at Jerusalem, they do not say to which of the gods it belongs, nor is there any image there; for they believe that there is no such thing as a bodily form of a god'" (Van der Horst, "The Unknown," p. 36-37). Thus, Lucan may have summarized Livy's sentence. For him, the fact that the god of the Jews could not be called by name and could not be represented through an image provided sufficient reasons for naming the god of Judea, *incertus*, "unknown." In addition, as Pieter Van der Horst as shown, in his *Contra Apionem*, Josephus dealt also with the "unknown" nature of the Jewish god, but in a more complex way than Livy or Lucan. Actually, he says that Moses showed that God was "known to us by his power, but unknown to us in his essence" (Josephus, *Contra Apionem* II.167: ?????? ?? ???? ????????, ?????? ?? ?????????? ????? ??????????; Van der Horst, "The Unknown," p. 37-38). It is remarkable that, in Lucan's Pompey's description of Eastern peoples, Judea is characterized by the singularity of its cult and the special nature of its god, a detail which highlights the exotic nature of this region and of its inhabitants. The insertion of the Jewish case in this list of the peoples submitted by



Pompey takes part in Lucan's general argumentation: Pompey defeated so many peoples – even the most remote, brutal or strange ones – that he controlled the whole universe and compelled Caesar's military ambitions to devote themselves to civil wars only.

This long enumeration of his successful commands, military victories and diplomatic treaties, enabled Lucan's Pompey not only to pretend that he had submitted the whole inhabited world, but also to attempt a last verbal attack towards Julius Caesar (v. 595). Actually he justifies the burst of the civil conflict with his father-in-law by the fact that the warmongering Caesar was unoccupied. This simplistic justification shows that Lucan distanced himself from the discourse he attributes to Pompey. Actually, in the proem of *Bellum civile*, Lucan explicitly regrets that the Roman people did not dedicate their efforts to fight their real enemies, i.e. the foreign enemies who remained a threat for the Empire, instead of waging internal war ([Lucan, The Civil War I.1-32](#)).

Keywords in the original language:

- [Aegyptus](#)
- [Arabes](#)
- [Arctos](#)
- [Armenia](#)
- [Baetis](#)
- [bellum civile](#)
- [Britannis](#)
- [calidus](#)
- [Cappadox](#)
- [Cilicia](#)
- [Colchis](#)
- [deus](#)
- [fama](#)
- [fatum](#)
- [ferox](#)
- [furor](#)
- [Gallia](#)
- [incertus](#)
- [Iudaea](#)
- [ius](#)
- [lustrum](#)
- [mundus](#)
- [occasus](#)
- [Oceanus](#)
- [orbis](#)
- [pelagus](#)
- [pirata](#)
- [pontus](#)
- [rex](#)
- [Rhenus](#)
- [Scythicus](#)
- [signum](#)
- [socer](#)
- [Sophena](#)
- [Sulla](#)
- [terra](#)
- [Tethys](#)
- [tropaeum](#)
- [urbs](#)

Thematic keywords in English:



- [Arabs](#)
- [Armenia](#)
- [Baetis](#)
- [Cappadocia](#)
- [civil war](#)
- [client king](#)
- [Colchis](#)
- [Egypt](#)
- [Jewish God](#)
- [Judea](#)
- [Julius Caesar](#)
- [Mithridates](#)
- [Pompey](#)
- [Roman empire](#)
- [Roman expansion](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Universe](#)

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

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