

# *Bella per Emathios plus quam civilia campos* (Luc. 1. 1): The Role and Consequences of a Geographical Inaccuracy

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## Resumen

Desde el primer verso de su poema, Lucano prefiere situar la guerra civil que está describiendo en Ematia, en lugar de Tesalia. Esta elección alude a las hijas de Piero, que se transformaron en urracas. La referencia de Persio a poetas y poetisas que se asemejan a los cuervos o urracas podría arrojar luz sobre la elección poética de Lucano.

## Abstract

From the very first line of his epic, Lucan prefers to place the civil war he is describing in Emathia, rather than Thessaly. By this choice he alludes to the daughters of Pierus, who were transformed into magpies. Persius' reference to poets and poetesses who are likened to crows or magpies could shed light on Lucan's poetic choice.

## Palabras clave

Lucano  
Ematia  
Geografía  
Piérides  
Persio

## Key words

Lucan  
Emathia  
Geography  
Pierides  
Persius

*AnMal Electrónica* 36 (2014)  
ISSN 1697-4239

In the beginning of his epic Lucan states that he signs wars worse than civil wars that were waged across Emathian plains: *Bella per Emathios plus quam civilia campos* (1. 1)<sup>1</sup>. As is well known, however, the most prominent battle of the said civil war between Caesar and Pompey took place in 48 B.C. in Pharsalus of Thessaly, and not in Emathia of Macedonia. This statement is clearly not a result of Lucan's geographical ignorance<sup>2</sup>, as in many passages of his work he distinctly places Pharsalus in Thessaly (cf. e.g. Luc. 6. 62; 6. 333ff.; 7. 6; 7. 152; 7. 302; 7. 693; 8.

<sup>1</sup> The Latin text is that of Shackleton Bailey (1997<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>2</sup> For Lucan's geography, see recently Tzounakas (2004), Plago (2006), Bexley (2009), Schrijvers (2010), and Pogorzelski (2011).

331), while it is also worth noting that the metonymic usage of the adjective *Emathius* not only in reference to Macedonia<sup>3</sup>, but also to Thessaly, is not a rare occurrence in Latin literature<sup>4</sup>. Many scholars have attempted to interpret the reason behind this geographical inaccuracy, which appears in the very first line of the epic, and is repeated many times throughout Lucan's work (cf. e.g. Luc. 6. 332; 6. 350; 7. 427; 7. 683; 8. 34; 8. 203; 9. 15). Most point to the precedent set by Vergil (Verg. G. 1. 491-492: *nec fuit indignum superis bis sanguine nostro / Emathiam et latos Haemi pinguescere campos*) and Ovid (Ov. Met. 5. 313-314: *vel nos Emathiis ad Paeonas usque nivosos / cedemus campis!*) and draw attention to the frequent confusion and association between the battle of Pharsalus and another civil war battle, namely that of Philippi in Macedonia in 42 B.C., due to their proximity in both time and location<sup>5</sup>. The continuance of civil wars, which did not conclude after the battle at Pharsalus, is often highlighted, as is Lucan's broader intention to allude to the endlessness of the civil war (Masters 1992: 216-259, esp. 237). Furthermore, this geographical inaccuracy appears to come to light as a programmatic indication of Lucan's intention to transcend «the mere physical location of the final battle» and could be interpreted within the framework of Lucan's obsession with geographical transgressions and his overall tendency, already evident in the proem, to highlight the transgression of boundaries in general (see Roche 2009: 100-103, following Henderson 1987: 125). It is worth noting Henderson's view, who behind Lucan's references to Emathia detects an implicit reference to Alexander the Great and the intention, on the part of the poet, to connect the outcome of the civil war with the establishment of an absolutist empire in Rome (Henderson 1987: 125, 153-155). Furthermore, the same scholar connects the epithet *Emathius* to the Greek epithet ημοθόεις (= 'sandy') and states: «within its 'name' the epithet *Emathian* catches up the 'pulverization' of *Bellum Ciuite*» (Henderson 1987: 155).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that, as Pliny the Elder informs us, *Emathia* was the ancient name for Macedonia (Plin. HN 4. 33: *Macedonia postea CL populorum, duobus incluta regibus quondamque terrarum imperio, Emathia antea dicta*).

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Roche (2009: 100): «The adjective strictly refers to Macedonia, but it became a metrically useful and evocative term for Thessaly with special reference to Pharsalus», citing OLD, s.v. *Emathius*, 1b, Lyne (1978: on *Ciris* 34) and Mayer (1986: 49).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Wuilleumier and Le Bonniec (1962: 14); for the confusion between the two battles, cf. also Ahl (1985: 280-281).

In parallel with the above possible interpretations, Lucan's reference to *Emathios ... campos* in the very first line of his epic seems to serve an additional literary purpose. The particular epic begins without the traditional invocation of the Muse and only during the famous eulogy of Nero (1. 33-66) is it stated that the inspiration given by the emperor himself can substitute Apollo and Bacchus, two deities traditionally associated with poetic inspiration: *sed mihi iam numen; nec, si te pectore vates / accipio, Cirrhaea velim secreta moventem / sollicitare deum Bacchumque avertere Nysa: / tu satis ad vires Romana in carmina dandas* (Luc. 1. 63-66). Examined from this perspective, the reference to Emathia at the beginning of the work could be read as an indirect, alternative form of allusion to the Muse.

Although the literary tradition associated with the Muses is extremely varied, according to many versions their birthplace was the area of Macedonia near Olympus, and more specifically Pieria and its neighbouring Emathia (see e.g. *OCD*, s.v. *Muses*). It is for this reason that in ancient Greek and Latin literature the Muses are often referred to as Πιερίδες or *Pieriae / Pierides*<sup>6</sup>. In fact, according to certain sources, their father was Pierus, King of Emathia (cf. e.g. Cic. *Nat. D.* 3. 54; Paus. 9. 29. 2-4; *OLD*, s.v. *Pieris*, and s.v. *Pierus*), and according to this version of the story the name *Pierides* is patronymic. Furthermore, the reference to Emathia recalls the scene described by Ovid (*Met.* 5. 250 ff.) in which the Muses and the daughters of Pierus, referred to as *Emathides* (Ov. *Met.* 5. 669), compete against each other in a singing contest, with the former prevailing and the latter being transformed into magpies. According to the terms set down by the daughters of Pierus, if they lost, they would grant the Muses the rights to the plains of Emathia (Ov. *Met.* 5. 313-314: *vel nos Emathiis ad Paeonas usque nivosos / cedemus campis!*). Initially, Malamud (2003: 42-43) intelligently links this episode described by Ovid to an episode in Lucan's ninth book in which Cato drinks from a spring contaminated with Medusa's blood (Luc. 9. 604-610), and to Lucan's poetics in general. Advancing further yet, Meunier (2009; 2012: 351-435) examines in greater depth the influence of the Ovidian passage and points to the fact that the reference to the area could easily lead the reader, by association, to the notion of the Muses as a source of poetic inspiration. Thus she interprets Lucan's innovative poetry as a product of the abandonment of the

<sup>6</sup> For these names, cf. e.g. Theoc. *Id.* 10. 24; Pind. *Ol.* 10. 96; Cic. *Nat. D.* 3. 54; Tib. 1. 4. 61; Ov. *Am.* 1. 1. 6.

traditional sources of inspiration and the adoption of the poetics imposed by Ovid's *Pierides*.

Given the connection between the area and the Muses, we should not rule out the possibility that by the inaccurate reference to the geographical location in the first line of his epic Lucan intends, among others, to reveal the source of his poetic inspiration indirectly: *Bella ... plus quam civilia*. Thus, the epic poet states that he signs of wars more than civil wars and appears to be inspired by them. In other words, his inspiration stems from the topic at hand, rather than from some other, superior power. It is a practice not unknown to Latin poetry, as it can be found, for example, in elegy, where the poet refers to his *puella*, which he describes as *divina*, and is inspired by her (cf. Miller 1986). As is well known, Lucan's epic differs quite noticeably in a number of instances from the earlier epic tradition. One such example is the absence of a positive central hero according to the model of the *Aeneid*. The central unifying idea that runs through the work is the theme of civil war and the threat it has posed for the *libertas* of the Roman people, a threat carried out by means of a negative hero, *impius Caesar* (cf. Due 1962: esp. 87-88, 106-120). By placing these wars, from the very proem, in an area where the Muses' rivals used to live, and which was later granted to them, the poet is implying that his theme has the power to offer him the necessary inspiration and, by extension, is capable of providing him with the required epic proportions. At the same time, however, by adopting a tactic whereby the poet equates the subject described with his poetic inspiration, Lucan distances himself from the usual epic practices and links his work with lower poetic compositions, a fact which facilitates the choice of a more prosaic tone for his work. Besides, given the fact that Emathia was the place of origin of Pierus' daughters, who following their defeat were transformed into magpies, it follows that the theme of choice would not be one of positive heroism which would require a high tone, but that of the *scelus* and *nefas* of civil war, which are better complemented by an appropriate stylistic choice.

At this point it would be useful to recall the words of the satirist Persius, a contemporary of Lucan. It is worth noting that –as we are informed by *Vita Persi*, attributed to Valerius Probus— both Persius and Lucan were pupils of Annaeus Cornutus, and that Lucan admired Persius' poetry: *cognovit per Cornutum etiam Annaeum Lucanum, aeque tum auditorem Cornuti. nam Cornutus illo tempore tragicus fuit sectae poeticae, qui libros philosophiae reliquit. sed Lucanus mirabatur*

*adeo scripta Flacci, ut vix se retineret recitantem a clamore: quae illius essent vera esse poemata se ludos facere* (*Vita Persi* 17-22). In the Prologue to his *Satires* (8-14), Persius criticizes the poets of his day by comparing them to crows and magpies:

*quis expedivit psittaco suum 'chaere'  
picamque docuit nostra verba conari?  
magister artis ingenique largitor  
venter, negatas artifex sequi voces.  
quod si dolosi spes refulserit nummi,  
corvos poetas et poetridas picas  
cantare credas Pegaseum nectar.*

It is likely that by choosing the image of poets-birds, Persius, in this particular instance, is implicitly attacking neoteric poetic compositions, such as Catullus' poems regarding Lesbia's *passer* or Ovid's elegy *Am. 2. 6* about Corinna's parrot. The comparison, however, of poets with birds not known for the sweetness of their voice, such as crows and magpies, could prove useful by facilitating a deeper understanding of Lucan's poetic direction. By choosing to sing about the horrors of civil war, an unpleasant subject with devastating consequences for the *libertas* of the Roman people, Lucan intentionally avoids Vergil's style and the ornamental embellishment in favour of a grim style which is more suited to the destructiveness of the civil warfare<sup>7</sup>. The sound of the magpie effectively lends the appropriate tone to the occasion and thus the epic poet adroitly implies the intended connection between his poetry and magpies, by placing the civil war he is describing in Emathia rather than Thessaly.

At the same time, the choice of Emathia, with all that this entails, seems to be connected with the historical developments of the first century B.C. and the political beliefs of the poet himself<sup>8</sup>. In the civil war described by Lucan, it is not Pompey's *causa melior*<sup>9</sup> which predominates, but Caesar's side, which violates every principle relating to legitimacy and justice. As is well known, the traditional principle that justice is rewarded is overturned in the work and is defeated by the triumph of an

<sup>7</sup> For a brief synopsis of Lucan's style, see e.g. Braund (1992: xlvi-l).

<sup>8</sup> For Lucan's opposition to tyranny in his epic, see Tzounakas (2013: 522, n. 52), with relevant bibliography.

<sup>9</sup> For Pompey's side as the *causa melior* of the civil war, cf. e.g. Tzounakas (2005: 400).

impious leader. The poet loses no opportunity to show his political disappointment at the outcome of the conflict and to mourn for the consequent loss of Roman freedom. It is obvious that to approach such a subject with the inspiration of the traditional Muses would be inappropriate. The subversion of the moral order described requires the appropriate subversion of the means of poetic inspiration. Thus, a poem exploring such themes cannot but be paired with the *Emathides*, defeated by the Muses, and the only figures suitable to allude to the unfortunate, according to the poet, developments. Furthermore, it is worth noting that such a choice is in accordance with Lucan's broader strategy to remove the gods from the action by rejecting the *deorum ministeria*, and supports the overall anthropocentric tone of his epic.

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