

## To what extent can we witness a crisis of Roman identity in civil war?

In the respective civil conflicts of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Tacitus' *Histories*, there is plentiful evidence for a crisis of Roman identity in civil war. However, closer examination of the nuances and realities of civil war reveals that collective identity is fractured, but there are still aspects of Roman identity present within individuals. By first unpacking the phrase 'crisis of Roman identity' some criteria and matrices against which to measure a crisis of Roman identity become apparent. These are core values which are integral to Roman identity formation, namely morality and the Roman constitution. Analysis of these and their intricacies demonstrate that there is clear evidence of decline in these values, but that aspects such as *virtus* and *pietas* become warped rather than non-existent. Further examination of this leads to the conclusion that collective Roman identity is threatened during civil war, but that individual identity is still very much intact.

It is prudent to first examine what constitutes 'Roman identity' and what we mean by a 'crisis' of Roman identity. Miguel John Versluys suggests that 'Roman national identity was a legal status unaffected by cultural choices.'<sup>1</sup> However, a simple legal criteria of Roman citizenship as constituting being 'Roman' is insufficient and problematic because Roman citizenship was highly malleable throughout Roman history; not only did it encompass a very wide range of people at varying times – for example, following Caracalla's edict of 212 CE which granted citizenship to all free subjects of the Empire – but also not all citizens were bestowed equal privileges and opportunities. Thus, it cannot be seen as a unifying and homogenous quality. As Greg Woolf puts it, 'Romans did not use citizenship as a way of creating a hard boundary between themselves and aliens. Instead, they used the language of citizenship to express a set of statuses and relationships' which defined how individuals might interact with the wider community.<sup>2</sup> As such, Roman identity could be said to be subjective, a social construct, something defined and asserted by cultural ideals, traditions, and behaviours. Gregory Golden offers us a definition of 'crisis' as 'a situation in which a decision maker [...] perceives a threat to itself or to

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<sup>1</sup> Versluys 2013, 437.

<sup>2</sup> Woolf 2013, 220.

things upon which the decision maker places very high value (core values).'<sup>3</sup> To this I might add that a 'crisis' of Roman identity can be seen through drastic changes and inversions to the social and cultural frameworks which helped to define Roman identity; or, in other words, an alteration or threat to the very institutions and qualities which made Romans 'Roman.' By analysing core aspects of Roman identity and examining whether these appear in jeopardy, we can consider to what extent there is a crisis of identity in civil war.

To begin with, model behaviour and morality were key tenants of Roman self-image. The *mos maiorum* acted as an unratified code of conduct, highlighting values such as *virtus* and *pietas* as ideals of behaviour and character. *Virtus* in particular encapsulates the values expected of a Roman man, connoting masculine honour, courage, and virtue. Indeed, Catalina Balmaceda asserts that it is 'a specific marker of identity: *virtus* in some way Romanizes the bearer.'<sup>4</sup> As such, it seems fair to say that *virtus* is deeply integrated into the Roman identity, and its treatment is pervasive in both Lucan's *Bellum Civile* and Tacitus' *Histories*, thus meriting particular attention.

In book two of Tacitus' *Histories*, which focuses primarily on the civil conflict between Vitellius and Otho in 69 CE, the decline of Roman morality is especially evident in the barbarism and depravity displayed by the Roman soldiers. For example, Tacitus describes a revolt in Corsica following a victory by Otho's forces, detailing an episode in which Decumus Pacarius, a procurator, orders the Roman knight Quintus Certus to be killed (2.16 *Quintium Certum equitem Romanum, interfici iubet*). The savage and immoral behaviour of Pacarius is striking. The juxtaposition of the Roman knight (*equitem Romanum*) and the order that he should be killed (*interfici iubet*) emphasises that Pacarius is executing a fellow Roman and thus transgressing social bonds. The contrast reveals that being Roman is insufficient in guaranteeing safety or clemency in civil war, suggesting a breakdown in the unity of a collective identity. The revelation that those present at the scene were terrified by the deaths (2.16 *morte exterriti qui aderant*) implies cruelty so extreme that soldiers who are accustomed to violence and barbaric acts are unnerved and scared by this. Here we are provided a clear picture of soldiers

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<sup>3</sup> Golden 2013, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Balmaceda 2017, 8.

turned cruel and violent rather than honourable and chivalrous. Tacitus moralises via polarity in order to further clarify this; we are told that Germany and the strength of its legions are far away (2.16 *longe Germaniam virisque legionum*), which places the disordered and immoral Roman forces at odds with the strong unity of the Germans. Ronald Mellor suggests that Tacitus tends to foreground the declining morality of the Romans by contrasting it to the ‘natural morality’ of foreign peoples.<sup>5</sup> Rhiannon Ash adds that the exemplary behaviour of ‘lower peoples’ by contrast makes the Roman soldiers seem like they ‘often behave like foreign invaders.’<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the barbarism and immorality exhibited by the procurator and the soldiers in this passage align the Romans with alien threats, thus almost literally stripping them of their ‘Romanness’ and inverting the typical hierarchy in which the Romans regard the ‘other’ as inferior. In this episode, Tacitus conveys Roman morality, especially *virtus*, as jeopardised and decimated, suggesting a crisis of Roman identity.

Lucan presents us with a similar scene of declining morality in his depiction of the murder of Pompey (8.595-608). Just prior to the assassination, Lucan tells us that a Roman soldier named Septimius calls to Pompey from an Egyptian boat (8.595-6 *Romanus Pharia miles de puppe salutat Septimius*). The juxtaposition of the proper nouns *Romanus* and *Pharia* highlights the disconnect between the two geographical associations and presents Septimius as a hybrid figure: he is aligned with both the Romans and the Egyptians. This is an interesting portrayal of Pompey’s assassin as it would seem to remove Septimius from being ‘Roman,’ however this could be a conscious effort on Lucan’s part to highlight the treachery and betrayal of Septimius as he is abandoning his fellow countrymen and duty to his *patria*. Notably, Septimius is also described as savage, violent, cruel, and nothing milder than a wild beast in the act of murder (8.599-600 *inmanis violentus atrox nullaque ferarum mitior in caedes*). The conjunction of the three adjectives connoting barbarism and brutality (*inmanis violentus atrox*) is almost overwhelming in its harshness; the equation between Septimius and a wild beast is explicit in characterising him as inhuman. Again, we see a complete deconstruction of morality and virtue in a Roman soldier who is perpetrating violence against a fellow Roman. His murder of Pompey is similarly loaded with immorality: Lucan draws attention to the figurative act of fratricide by telling us that

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<sup>5</sup> Mellor 1999, 97.

<sup>6</sup> Ash 2010, 94.

Pompey was decapitated by one of his own (8.607-8 *Pellaeusque puer gladio tibi colla recidit Magne tuo*). The brutality of the verb *recidit*, exacerbated by its harsh consonant sounds and compounded by the ablative noun *gladio*, works alongside the possessive pronoun *tuo* to convey the sense of deep betrayal by Septimius and his complete lack of morality and decency; not only is he acting equally as, if not more, barbaric than Tacitus' soldiers, but he is also acting on behalf of the Egyptians against a fellow Roman who he was once allied with.

Linking to this, another aspect of Roman identity I want to examine is social cohesion and the idea of duty to the collective – that is, the state and the people of Rome. Neil Coffee asserts that 'Romans identified sets of proper social behaviours with certain key concepts. An individual showed *pietas* if he or she carried out duties toward family, community, and the gods.'<sup>7</sup> Within the *Histories* and *Bellum Civile*, we see a breakdown of unity and social relations, as well as a lack of respect and warped *pietas*.

An example of this occurs in book seven of *Bellum Civile*, when Caesar and his men lie down to sleep in their murdered enemies' beds and they become plagued with horrible nightmares and visions. Lucan likens the torment of the situation to Orestes seeing the face of the Furies (7.778 *Eumenidum vidit voltus Pelopeus Orestes*). In Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the final play of the trilogy *Oresteia*, Orestes is tormented by the Furies in an act of retributive justice for Orestes' murder of his mother Clytemnestra. The reference to Orestes could be a conscious effort on Lucan's part to recall Orestes' matricide and draw a parallel between Orestes' crime and the Roman civil war, implying that both are morally transgressive crimes which sever close relations. In both instances, murder tears apart a collective. However, it is key to Aeschylus' *Oresteia* that Orestes' matricide is arguably justified because Clytemnestra murdered Orestes' father, Agamemnon. Thus, whilst Orestes is being punished by the Furies for his own crime, it can be said that he himself punished Clytemnestra for hers. The implication of this for Lucan's soldiers, then, is that they are being punished for their actions, but they are also justified because of the actions of the Pompeian forces. This strengthens the image of a collective torn apart as we are presented

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<sup>7</sup> Coffee 2011, 418.

with an image of each side doing harm to the other in the name of justice. Paul Roche asserts that the patronymic *Pelopeus* links Orestes to his great-grandfather Pelops and that ‘the adjective may have been chosen because Pelops himself was a murderer, for which he was cursed.’<sup>8</sup> This is a sound analysis given that Lucan is drawing a parallel between Orestes facing his justice and the soldiers facing theirs and thus is highlighting the guilt on both parts. This is corroborated by the fact that Lucan also refers to Pentheus and Agave (7.780), which recalls Agave’s similarly transgressive actions toward her own son. In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, a group of women including Agave attack Pentheus during Bacchic rites, unaware of his identity. Again, Lucan highlights the tearing apart of familial relations which cannot be undone and links these examples to the Romans. It is significant that Lucan chooses to use examples from Greek mythology and literature in order to do so, rather than from Roman sources, perhaps underlining the movement away from and disintegration of Roman identity.

Counteraction of *pietas* is exhibited in Lucan’s representation of Caesar crossing the Rubicon, whereupon Caesar is visited by a personification of Rome:

*ingens uisa duci patriae trepidantis imago  
 clara per obscuram uoltu maestissima noctem  
 turrigero canos effundens uertice crines  
 caesarie lacera nudisque adstare lacertis  
 et gemitu permixta loqui 'quo tenditis ultra?  
 quo fertis mea signa, uiri? si iure uenitis,  
 si ciues, huc usque licet.'*

(1.186-192)

Lucan presents us with a striking image of ‘Rome’. It is notable that, despite the huge (186 *ingens*) apparition, it is her who is fearing (186 *trepidantis*). The disconnect between these two adjectives represents the extent of the apparition’s deterioration, as she is clearly very weak. Paul Roche suggests that this ‘transfers the natural human response to a superhuman figure,’ as Caesar should be the one scared, and that this implies that fear is a natural response to Caesar, one that all of Rome exhibits.<sup>9</sup> Given that Caesar’s act of crossing the Rubicon ignites civil war, it is fair to assume that Romans were wary of Caesar. As such, this demonstrates an inversion of *pietas*, where Caesar appears to be the

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<sup>8</sup> Roche 2019, 235.

<sup>9</sup> Roche 2009, 207.

dominant one and is no longer dutifully respectful to the *patria*. This is bolstered by the semantic field of weariness and dilapidation used to describe her: her hair is white (188 *canos effundens [...] crines*) and torn (189 *lacera*), her arms are bare (189 *nudisque [...] lacertis*), and her speech is broken with sobs (190 *gemitu permixta loqui*). Compounded with the use of the superlative *maestissima*, Lucan presents us with a broken and pathetic figure of the *patria*. The apparition's words are emphatic and evocative, as it reminds us that Caesar is acting unconstitutionally; she states that he must stop there if he comes as a lawful citizen (191-2 *si iure venitis, si cives, huc usque licet*). The anaphora of *si* followed in both instances by images of judicial constitution (*iure, cives*) foregrounds how Caesar is breaking the law and constitutes a threat to the Roman constitution. This personification literalises the concept of the *patria* and creates a visceral representation of how Caesar and civil war threaten to destroy Rome. Timothy Joseph suggests that Lucan opens his epic with this scene in order to counterpoise Caesar's self-representation in the *Commentarii* as a defender of the Republic; Lucan instead portrays Caesar as 'the enemy of his own people, crossing into Italy with an army of barbarians.'<sup>10</sup> This leads us to a complication: with regard to aspects of Roman identity such as *pietas*, we must consider what implications our rendering of 'Roman identity' has on our analysis.

'Roman identity' conveys a subjective collective identity, in that there are no specific legal criteria which makes one 'Roman', but rather Roman identity is predicated upon socially accepted and mutually agreed value systems which include behaviours, values, and customs. Therefore, what is accepted as being 'Roman' is mutually agreed by the collective. As Matthew B. Roller emphasises, the system of values that the Romans subscribed to were 'social and external,' meaning moral value was validated and defined by the wider community. Therefore, civil war, by its very nature, 'divides the community and turns it against itself, abolishing the social boundaries and bonds that makes these moral categories consistent.'<sup>11</sup>

Returning to Lucan's portrayal of Caesar crossing the Rubicon, this inconsistent sense of identity and morality can be seen in the subjectivity of this moment. Although Lucan draws attention to the

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph 2017, 302.

<sup>11</sup> Roller 1996, 321-2.

transgressive and unconstitutional nature of Caesar's actions and characterises him akin to a foreign invader and a threat to Rome, Caesar's own *Bellum Civile* depicts Pompey in this way, presenting himself as defender of the Republic. There is a certain paradox at play in the way that Roman identity simultaneously is and is not intact, depending on the subjective point of view. In civil war, both factions attempt to distinguish the opposing one as a threat, meaning they are compelled to defend the *patria* by their civic duty and their *pietas*. Jeffrey Beneker asserts that 'defense of the patria was in general a very powerful rhetorical weapon for Romans who wished to justify their own positions and to incriminate their opponents in times of civil war.'<sup>12</sup> The issue with this is that it creates a simultaneity of identity: in our example, Lucan's point of view suggests that Caesar's Roman identity is in crisis because he is counteracting his *pietas*, but this ultimately means that Pompey's is intact because he is doing his duty by defending the *patria*. Since Caesar also claims that Pompey is acting unconstitutionally, this paradigm is then flipped, meaning that they both have and have not lost their Roman identity. When considering this, a resolution appears: collectively, Roman identity is in crisis because unity is dissolved when the collective splits into two distinct opposing factions, and as Henning Börm puts it, 'social disintegration is an inevitable aspect of civil strife,'<sup>13</sup> but as individuals – whether that be individual factions or individual people – aspects of Roman identity is still very much intact.

Tacitus exemplifies this idea in his *Histories*: prior to his account of the battle of Bedriacum, he includes a digression in which he considers a story claiming that the armies of Vitellius and Otho were considering cancelling the battle. In order to back up his claim that this was untrue, Tacitus turns to a discussion the repetitive and inherent nature of violence within Roman society. He argues that Otho and Vitellius would not have halted the battle because 'they were driven to discord by the same divine anger, the same madness of man, the same roots of crime' (2.38 *eadem illos deum ira, eadem hominum rabies, eadem scelerum causae in discordiam egere*), and he turns to several historical examples of civil strife, namely Marius and Sulla and Caesar and Pompey, in order to evidence his point. Tacitus suggests all of this stems from 'that old desire for power long since implanted in man' (2.38 *vetus ac*

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<sup>12</sup> Beneker 2011, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Börm 2016, 15.

*iam pridem insita mortalibus potentiae cupido*). This suggests that all civil wars in Rome's history have originated from the same motivation and that there is an endless cycle of corruption and continuity; the anaphora of *eadem* foregrounds this. However, this could also show how, in each civil war, both sides are effectively fighting for the same reasons and using the same justifications for their actions each time. Therefore, there is a repeated cycle of crises of Roman identity in each civil war. This example also reveals a final facet of our exploration of a crisis of Roman identity: at what point civil war itself could be said to be incorporated into the Roman identity. As Jonathan Master points out, Tacitus 'suggests that the drive for individual power at the expense of the common welfare and a predilection for internal violence are traditionally Roman traits,' and that 'the seeds of conflict were always present in Roman society.'<sup>14</sup> Whilst it is certainly true that Tacitus seems to be suggesting an inherent propensity for civil conflict within Romans, it is important to consider our definition of 'identity.' As we have established, Roman identity is subjective and what is accepted as being 'Roman' is mutually agreed by the collective. In other words, Romans choose how to define and identify themselves, so whilst there does seem to be a pattern of civil wars throughout Rome's history, they do not embrace this as part of their identity. Thus, the implication of Master's idea – that civil war is actually a part of the Roman identity and therefore cannot be said to be in crisis – does not work on all levels.

The question of how far we can see a crisis of Roman identity in civil war is complex. On the one hand, civil war by definition fractures the community and breaks down collective identity, as well as decimating morality and warping *pietas*. The *Histories* and *Bellum Civile* both provide ample evidence for this. However, this evidence can also be manipulated and considered from the opposite direction in order to show that facets of Roman identity are still intact. This stems from the fact that the concept of Roman identity is malleable and subjective. It seems fair to conclude that there is an overall crisis of collective Roman identity during civil war, but that aspects of Roman identity are still apparent in our texts.

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<sup>14</sup> Master 2014, 128.



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