

Eating the Egyptian Gods:  
Cleopatra, Caesar, and the Seductive Qualities of Macedonian-Style Empire

Lucan's depiction of Cleopatra's lavish banquet [Luc.10.104ff] culminates in a shocking description of the cuisine at the queen's table. According to the poet, Cleopatra quite literally serves up the gods of the Egyptian pantheon, placing *multas uolucresque ferasque Aegypti . . . deos* on her table [Luc.10.59-60]. Lucan's Cleopatra simultaneously evokes and obliterates the traditional Vergilian depiction of the queen fighting piously alongside these same gods at Actium. Vergil's vivid description of Cleopatra's monstrous deities, so un-Roman in their anthropo-zoomorphic nature, serves not only to mark the queen as unquestionably foreign, but also aids in de-Romanizing her ally, Antony, effectively removing the taint of civil war from Octavian's Actian victory. By demolishing Vergil's iconic depiction of Cleopatra, Lucan ensures that the reader will have a fresh perspective on the queen's identity. An examination of Lucan's portrayal of the queen throughout Book Ten reveals precisely what this identity will be. The poet consistently emphasizes Cleopatra's Macedonian heritage: the queen is the *Pharii proles clarissima Lagi* [Luc.10.86], highlighting her relationship to Ptolemy I's Macedonian father; her palace is called the *Emathia tecta* [Luc.10.58], referencing the Macedonian region from which Lagus came.

This paper will consider how Lucan's peculiarly Macedonian Cleopatra acts as a representative of Alexander's legacy within Book Ten. This legacy is a crucial element of the book from its outset. In describing Caesar's visit to Alexander's tomb at the beginning of the book, Lucan enters into a brief digression on Alexander's conquests [Luc.10.20-51]. In doing so, the poet establishes a dichotomy between the Macedonian approach to imperial expansion, centering on an ambitious autocrat, and a Roman one centered on the cooperation of the many, a dichotomy characterized by the contrasting images of Roman *pilum* and the Macedonian *sarisa*

[Luc.10.48-9]. For Lucan, the ultimate symbol of this Macedonian-style of empire lies in Alexander's overreaching quest for the source of the Nile [Luc.10.40]. With this dichotomy established, the reader enters in to the events of Book Ten wondering whether Caesar, with Pompey now vanquished, will uphold the traditional Roman approach to power or whether he will be seduced by autocratic, Macedonian style. This question is answered in Cleopatra's climactic banquet. Lucan's specifically Macedonian Cleopatra not only seduces the general with her sexual wiles, but also with her ancestral form of empire. The success of the latter seduction becomes clear at the height of the banquet when Caesar inquires about the source of the Nile [Luc.10.191-192], an inquiry which indicates his symbolic assumption of Alexander's quest for power.