

In discussing the ‘snake episode’ in Cato’s march through the desert in *BC* 9, much ink has been spilled over the bizarre role of the snakes, often to the exclusion of the scene’s human characters. While the two most recent commentaries avoid seeing deeper symbolism in the episode (Raschle 2001, Wick 2004), other recent discussions have focused on its black humor (Johnson 1987, 42-66), violation of boundaries (Bartsch 1997, 29-32), or spectacular function as *venatio* (Leigh 1997, 265-82). The snakes that star in these readings are certainly the most unusual aspect of the episode, but the soldiers who die so gruesomely here deserve a closer look. Each soldier is given a single name, not enough to identify him as an individual according to Roman onomastic practice, but containing geographic or historical material allowing the reader to construct a map of Italy and of Roman history that places this episode in the company of others in which Lucan discusses civil war on a metaphoric or cosmic scale. This paper focuses on the soldiers as symbols of Italy, largely through examination of their names as conveyers of ethnic and geographic data.

Since Swanson’s *The Names in Roman Verse* (1967), personal names in poetry have been seen as poetic tools (e.g. the Virgilian studies of O’Hara 1996 and Paschalis 1997). Lucan, however, engages not so much in Alexandrian etymological word play as manipulation of the intrinsically monumental features of standard Roman naming practices; for example, Sabellus (*BC* 9.763) is a normal *cognomen*, attested 11 times in *CIL*. As an adjective, it simply means “Sabellian,” a collective name for the Oscan-speaking peoples of Sabine origin, including the Samnites. Poetically, however, it can function as a substitute for *Sabinus* itself, as in Horace, *Epistles* 1.16.49, alluding to the strict morality associated with the Sabines. Lucan’s use of the name in the snake episode has a similar purpose; in one word it implies that this soldier is of old Italian stock and presumably old Italian virtue, neither of which do him any good in the desert when the bite of the *seps* causes him to melt, not even leaving a corpse for burial (*BC* 9.766-787). A similar examination of the names and occasional attributes of the other six soldiers finds similar allusions to locations all over Italy, from Liguria to the Greek South, encompassing peoples of key importance in Roman expansion, such as the Etruscans, and alluding to major moments of Roman history, such as the war with Hannibal. As such, Lucan’s seven soldiers attacked in the African desert symbolize Italy and the Italian backbone of the Roman army, linking this passage to others in which Lucan depicts Italy as desolated and ravaged by the civil wars.