Structures of Epic Poetry

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Volume II.1: Configuration

Edited by
Christiane Reitz and Simone Finkmann

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Battle scenes in ancient epic – a short introduction

Battle narratives are an integral, even constituent part of epic poetry, which is why an entire volume of this compendium is dedicated to the study of this central structure. Already the programmatic proems of Greek and Roman epic leave no doubt as to the androcentric worldview of the epic genre,[1] which, in contrast to the *epyllion*, focuses on male heroes and their explorative missions and military conflicts on behalf of a patriarchal society.[2] Battle scenes are at the core of the epic plot and generally form the climax of the action with the confrontation of the two opposing armies or a decisive duel between their respective leaders, the protagonist and antagonist of the narrative. The length of the depicted battles varies from a single day (with sunset as the starting and nightfall as the end point) to several years. Some epic poems also include *analepseis* which reference battles that occur prior to the main narrative and *prolepseis* which anticipate historical battles that take place long after the conclusion of the epic plot, sometimes even in the poet's lifetime. Similarly, the narrative scope of the embedded fighting scenes ranges from shorter episodes to book-length depictions. It can even be the pervasive subject of an entire epic,[3] which is therefore referred to as a heroic or martial epic, as in the case of Homer's *Iliad*, Statius' *Thebaid*, Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, or Triphiodorus' *Sack of Troy*, or as a historical epic, like Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile* and Silius Italicus' *Punica*. It has long been established that the structure of individual battle scenes can be important for the epic *equilibrium* in general. Tipping (2004)

1 Cf. Hom. Il. 1.1–2a μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληιάδεω Ἀχιλῆος / οὐλομένην, Hom. Od. 1.1 Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, A.R. 1–2a Ἀρχόμενος σέο Φοῖβε παλαιγενέων κλέα φωτῶν / μνήσομαι, and Verg. Aen. 1.1 *arma virumque cano*.

2 Cf. Keith (2000, 5): "Classical Roman definitions of epic from Ennius to Statius adapt ancient Greek genre theory to characterise the subject of the genre as the 'greatest accomplishments of the fathers' (*maxima facta patrum*, Enn. Epigr. 45.2 Courtney), primarily, though not exclusively, in warfare." Cf. also Foley (2005, 105): "If the real subject of heroic epic is kings and battles (Verg. ecl. 6.3) and more generally how to face life and death as a man and member of a community (army, band of heroes, city, state, republic, or empire) defined and dominated by men, where do women fit in?"

3 To a lesser degree, this also applies to Vergil's *Aeneid* with the portrayal of the Trojan War in Book 2 and the Italian Wars in Books 7–12, and Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, in which the plot of the Indian War narrative dominates Books 13–40.

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has, for example, supported this observation for the *Punica* where the structure of Book 12 with its frequent changes in the power dynamics between the Roman and Carthaginian armies is representative of the macrostructure of the entire epic.[4]

Whereas the aforementioned epics focus on one main war – the Trojan War, the Battle of the Seven against Thebes, the Roman Civil War between Caesar and Pompey (49–45 BC), and the Second Punic War (218–201 BC) – *nostos*, *ktisis*, and travel epics also contain a great variety of battle scenes, both in retrospective and as part of the heroes' adventures during their sea voyages.[5] Battle scenes can be extensive but concentrated in one half of the epic, as in the second, 'Iliadic' half of the *Aeneid*, or they can be spread out more or less evenly over the entire narrative, as in the 'episodic' epics: e.g. Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Apollonius' and Valerius' *Argonautica*. With the exception of the Trojan War, the settings of martial epics do not focus on one city but can frequently shift between two cities, e.g. Thebes and Argos in the *Thebaid*, or they can even take on a global scale, as in Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile*. Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, of course, stands out from the rest of the epic poems under discussion in this volume as it combines a multitude of different narrative strands that are related by a shared topic, transformation, or the characters involved.[6] The poem nonetheless contains a variety of smaller, clearly structured fighting sequences, such as the fight between Perseus and Phineus for Andromeda (Ov. met. 5.30–235) or the battle between the Lapiths and the Centaurs (12.210–535), as well as a detailed account of the most famous battle of Ovid's epic predecessors, the Trojan War (12.1–13.622).[7] A comparison of the battle scenes in Apollonius' and Valerius' *Argonautica* is moreover particularly interesting given their shared cast of characters, subject matter, and macrostructure. By adding two full-scale battle scenes (the Cyzicus nyktomachy in Book 3 and the Colchian-Scythian civil war in Book 6) to his account, the Flavian poet incorporates the popular civil war *topos* into his mythical epic while at the same time 'Romanising' the portrayal of the epic protagonist, the Greek hero Jason, who is no longer merely the democratic leader of Apollonius' version but also excels

4 Cf. Tipping (2004, 363): "*Punica* 12 contains a plurality of possible turning points, and this clustering might itself cause us to perceive that book as central to Silius' poem." Cf. also Nesselrath (1986, 217–18): "So wirkt dieses ganze zwölfte Buch wie das Hin- und Herwogen einer epischen Schlacht im Großen – wobei an die Stelle der Einzelkämpfe die einzelnen Städte getreten sind, die Hannibal entweder erfolgreich Widerstand leisten oder ihm zum Opfer fallen."

5 For this distinction, cf. the introduction by Reitz/Finkmann to epic journeys in volume II.2.

6 This is also why Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is excluded from most of the discussions of individual battle scenes in this volume and receives a separate treatment by Sharrock in volume I.

7 Cf. Braun (2009, 94 and esp. 100–3 with an overview of Ovid's three main narrative patterns for the abovementioned battle scenes).

as a military general on the battlefield with traditional Roman qualities.[8] This tendency of Romanisation, which is decisively influenced by Vergil's national epic on the foundation of Rome, is evident in all Flavian epics.[9] It is especially manifest in the poets' portrayal of and attitude towards disguise and concealed manœuvres as a deliberate military strategy, generally as a last resort. These rarely employed operations are utilised by the Flavian authors to address the generals' morally ambivalent decision to gain a tactical advantage with a hidden manœuvre instead of heroically facing the enemy in open battle.[10]

Battle scenes in general are one of the main contexts in which epic heroes are characterised. They are defined by their loyalty and *fides* towards their respective families and *patriae*, as well as by their leadership qualities in battle, their treatment of fallen soldiers, especially if the victims are of the same nationality, and by whether or not they show their opponents mercy or treat their corpses and mourning family members with respect and piety. Whereas Homer and Vergil firmly focus on their respective protagonists, it has been argued that in later heroic epic, poets lose interest in focussing primarily "on the commander and the decisions he made".[11] In Statius' *Thebaid*, for instance, "battle scenes, unlike those of Vergil, show no sign of generalship or strategy: infantry, cavalry, and war chariots are committed pell-mell; the fighting is neither Homeric, nor anything else."[12] This is, however, no general tendency for Flavian epic, as Valerius Flaccus and Silius Italicus both draw attention to the military strategies the respective leaders are employing. Valerius, in particular, juxtaposes Jason's and Hercules' *aristeiai* and, by extension, Jason's leadership qualities with Hercules' devastating physical power in Book 3 of the *Argonautica*, while Silius contrasts the opposing generals' military strategies and their attempts to manipulate their opponent's manœuvres in the very tactical warfare between Fabius and Hannibal in Book 7 of the *Punica*.

Strategic alterations in the style of fighting are also reflected in the change of the rhythm and pace of the respective battle narratives. Other important structural elements that can have a great impact on the narrative pace are catalogues, similes,

8 Cf., e.g., Hershkowitz (1998, 127): "Jason, even though he is never explictly connected with Rome or its leaders, can easily be identified by the reader as a Roman-style leader with Roman-style virtues and values, and is even placed in Roman-style situations, all without renouncing his Greek nationality."

9 Cf. also Hershkowitz (1998, 127–9).

10 Cf. Dinter/Finkmann/Khoo on nyktomachy and ambush scenes in this volume.

11 Levene (2010, 311).

12 Sandbach (1965–1966, 34).

and especially direct speeches.[13] They render the narration more vivid, regulate its pace, and help structure the battle scene – with easily recognisable pre-battle speeches (e.g. war councils and war cries), mid-battle speeches (e.g. challenges, taunts, and exhortations), and post-battle speeches (most notably, the laments and the *oratio funebris*). The resulting recognisability of the different stages of an epic battle scene and of the various types of fighting are used by the poets as a rich and flexible tool for variegating their only seemingly rigid and highly formalised songs of war. In addition to a variation and modification of the different structural elements and narrative patterns employed in the individual battle sequences, a shift in the narrative speed and intensity is important to avoid monotony and keep the reader's interest. The same applies for narrative techniques like zooming in on individual fighting scenes to focus on heroic, gruesome, pathetic, surprising, or sentimental details of the described single combat, and zooming out to display the greater strategic movements within a mass combat. Post-Homeric and especially post-Vergilian epicists go to great lengths to create suspense and offer an innovative take on the well-known wars whose outcome are clear from the very beginning. This difficulty has been firmly established for ancient epic in general, but particularly for Flavian epicists, who use a variety of narrative techniques to solve the problem:[14] Gibson (2008, 86–7), for instance, concludes in his seminal paper on Statius' *Thebaid* that "Statius foreshortens battle narratives in his poem, sometimes to an extraordinary degree. In part we may see this as Statius' response to the problem of how to sustain the narrative and the interest of the readers. This is an issue that is arguably germane to martial epic in general."

The complexity of battle scenes is also explicitly addressed in the epics themselves, not only in their programmatic proems, but also in authorial comments by the epic narrators who raise this concern at the start of longer battle descriptions.[15] Especially the Homeric and Vergilian narrators emphasise their difficulty in accurately describing the unfolding events. They invoke the Muses to ask them for their support for this task. In addition to the well-known appeals to the Muses,[16] Gibson (2008, 85) draws attention to the "often forgotten moment in Hom. Il. 12.175–6 where the poet acknowledges the practical problem of narrating the complexities of battle: ἄλλοι δ' ἀμφ' ἄλλῃσι μάχην ἐμάχοντο πύλῃσιν: / ἀργαλέον δέ με ταῦτα

13 Cf. Reitz/Scheidegger Lämmle/Wesselmann on catalogues, Gärtner/Blaschka on similes, and Reitz on speeches in volume I.

14 On the *Aeneid*, cf. Harrison (1991, *p*. xxxi): "The fundamental problem in writing the Iliadic *Aeneid* was that of maintaining vitality and interest in a long epic war-narrative."

15 For the invocations at the beginning of catalogues of troops, see Reitz/Scheidegger Lämmle/Wesselmann in volume I.

16 Cf. Schindler in volume I.

θεὸν ὣς πάντ' ἀγορεῦσαι, 'The others fought the battle at different gates: it is difficult for me to narrate all this as if I were a god'." Similarly, at the beginning of the 'Iliadic *Aeneid*', Vergil states the following: Verg. Aen. 7.44b–5a *maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo* / *maius opus moueo*, "a greater order of things is created by me, I set in motion a greater work." At times, the narrators not only invoke the Muses for inspiration and support but they also ask them to give them insights into the reasons for the apparently senseless war. This is especially the case in civil war epics, such as Lucan's *Bellum Ciuile*, and in scenes depicting a civil war or a battle violating the bond of *xenia*, such as Valerius Flaccus' Cyzicus episode where the narrator very harshly criticises Cybele, Pan, and Bellona for having actively provoked the war, and Jupiter for doing nothing to prevent it (Val. Fl. 3.14–18a and 3.46–7). It is also this horrific civil war(-like) context which inspires narrators to switch from subsequent to simultaneous narration and to address the involved fighters, in particular imminent victims, in order to warn them of their inevitable death, to express their sympathy for brave young warriors with great potential whose life has been cut short, or to curse the abhorrent war.

The topic of warfare in ancient epic is so vast and complex that it is not surprising that a comprehensive diachronic study that unites the analyses of the different individual structural elements of war narratives in ancient epic from Homer to Triphiodorus has not yet been undertaken. The most helpful study to date is still Miniconi's *Étude des thèmes 'guerriers' de la poésie épique gréco-romaine* from 1951, which provides a very useful overview of the different types of battle scenes but remains rather succinct in its qualitative and quantitative analysis of the individual epic structures. Modern scholarship has instead focused on the synchronic analysis of warfare and its related topics in one or a small selection of individual authors, or on the diachronic study of one or more structural and thematic patterns of battle narratives in ancient epic.[17] The overwhelming influence of the formulaic Homeric composition, which is perhaps nowhere more pervasive than in the representation of battle scenes in his epic successors,[18] is also reflected in the greater focus on Homer's structural elements and narrative patterns, which is best exemplified by Fenik's indispensible monograph from 1968. Vergil, by comparison, "has not yet found his Fenik".[19] This is also true for Homer's other epic successors, perhaps with the exception of Lucan's and Silius' historical epics which have re-

17 Cf. the bibliography below for a selection of seminal publications on warfare and battle scenes in Greek and Roman epic.

18 Although there have been attempts, such as by Raabe (1974), to attribute a more individualistic technique of narrating battle scenes to Vergil, the underlying Homeric patterns form the basis for all later epic poets. On the use of epic formulas as a narrative tool, see Bakker in volume I.

19 Horsfall (1987, 48).

ceived more attention, especially in the form of studies examining the historical accuracy of their presentation of the Roman Civil War and the Second Punic War, and comparing the epic narratives with their respective historical sources.

With the following chapters we attempt to fill this double vacancy. The selected contributions analyse and trace the development of the constituent structural elements of battle narratives in the epic tradition, from arming scenes and other war preparations to the outbreak of hostilities in single, mass, or chain-combat with related set-pieces such as *aristeiai* and *teichoscopies*, and pauses or turning points that result from unexpected ceasefires or breaches of contract, to the final stages of the battle which can end in (continued) flight and pursuit, or with funeral rites and ceremonies. The volume also reflects on a selection of highly specialised battle scenes which digress from the traditional narrative patterns: nyktomachies, theomachies, as well as naval and river battles. To limit the scope of our compendium we made the decision not to include unorganised fighting sequences and individual actions such as *impromptu* combat, brawls, duels, plundering, spoiling, the fight against nature and monsters, the retrieval of the corpses of fellow combatants, or tactical manœuvres such as scouting expeditions, military marches, and encampments. Other interesting topics could have been personalised battle sequences that focus on one particular group of characters, like Titanomachies, Gigantomachies, or Amazonian warfare, and the role of women in battle more generally, professional groups such as helmsmen, bards, priests, and seers who tend to abstain from fighting for different reasons, as well as anonymous warriors and named fighters who only appear in the context of the battle and die shortly after they are first introduced.[20] It would also not have been fruitful to treat the complex topic of battle speeches in one single chapter. The different types of speech acts are not only very numerous, but they also range from assemblies, war cries, exhortations, taunts, threats, challenges, deliberations, prayers, and appeals for mercy, to victory speeches, laments, and many more. These different sub-types deserve individual assessments and will be the topic of another volume on speech representation in ancient epic.[21]

20 The first extensive treatment of the so-called 'Kleine Kämpfer' is the seminal study by Strasburger (1954). Several other studies on marginal characters in epic battle scenes followed; cf., e.g., Dinter (2005) on minor heroes in Vergil, Nehrkorn (1960) on Lucan, and Kleywegt (1991) and Dräger (2001) on Valerius Flaccus.

21 Cf. Finkmann/Forstall/Verhelst (forthcoming).

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