

Reports from the embedded.

Interpreting sources on indigenous revolts in Roman North Africa.

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1. Perceiving the Empire

One century ago, ancient historians and archaeologists generally interpreted Roman imperial history positively, stressing the merits of Roman conquest: the creation of peace and stability, and the advent of civilization it implied for the peoples who allowed themselves to be civilized and to abandon their indigenous culture. So in 1885 Boissier stated that “*the world had never been, if not happier, at least more prosperous*” (Boissier 1885 25), while in 1910 Haverfield posed that this rise of happiness was “*not confined to a dominant race or to an upper class*”(Haverfield, Davidson et al. 1910 106). Long before, Gibbon wrote that “*the vanquished nations, blended into one great people, resigned the hope, nay even the wish, of resuming their independence, and scarcely considered their own existence as distinct from the existence of Rome.*” (Gibbon 1896).

The last decades of the twentieth century has witnessed a growing effort in nativist and post-colonial studies to nuance these perspectives, to question any overtly positive reconstruction of Roman imperialism. More attention has been paid to the active role played by the indigenous actors themselves in the integration process. Most interestingly, archaeological studies have focussed on the different ways in which cultural influences were negotiated throughout the Roman Empire. It has been one of the merits of, for instance, Revell’s “*Roman imperialism and local identities*” to reveal how these influences, and the conception of being Roman, were experienced very differently within and between provincial communities in the West, even between local societies that were situated fairly close to each other (Revell 2009). Especially in archaeology, the grand unidirectional story of Romanization has clearly fallen apart; there are a large number of different stories to tell.

As a historical research topic, indigenous revolts may connect with two features of post-colonial studies. Firstly, this type of revolts may be regarded as a negative mode of negotiation of Roman imperial policy, and the various political, social, cultural and economic processes these societies underwent. A revolt points to the limits of integration of the insurgents, yet at the same time it may also point to the limited possibilities or availability of positive negotiation modes.

It may also be interesting to assess the impact of insurgencies on imperial policy. Even in these cases when the rebels were crushed, they may have been successful in changing the conditions of subjugation. So Tacitus attests that the first thing Agricola did after he quelled

the British revolt, was the removal of the causes of war, the grievances of the local inhabitants (Tac. Agr. 17).

The second way in which a historical study of indigenous revolts may connect with post-colonial studies is provided by the fact that it may allow for an opportunity to reconstruct differentiated patterns of integration in the Roman Empire. Revolts may highlight the highly specific integration trajectories of individual communities. But at least for the western provinces, the opportunities of a comparative approach which surpasses the case-specific or regional level have insufficiently been taken.

The aim of this contribution is to illustrate with cases from North Africa the pitfalls that may stem from a number of challenging characteristics of the various sources. At some point, these challenges may distort the analysis, and may pose limits to the potential analytical value of revolts as indicators of the character and motives of Roman imperialism.

2. Reports from the embedded

Firstly, one should consider the fact that a vast majority of the literary sources were produced by Romans or Roman-sided authors. Attention has to be paid to the problem of veracity caused by the Romano-centric perspective defended in the **literary accounts**. To some extent the ancient author can be compared with contemporary embedded journalism.

One may truly be able to speak of embedded historiography, which defended an imperial discourse that hardly questioned the legitimacy of Roman rule and domination.

One may also expect that the typical emphasis on the individual, on morality, may also form an important obstacle to the reconstruction. There is also an apparent tendency to exaggerate Roman victories. For instance, after the bloody suppression of the tax rebellion of the Nasamones in Tripolitania in 86 A.D., Domitian is said to have exclaimed in the senate that he had forbidden the Nasamones to exist (Dio Cass. 67, 4, 6-7). But this statement should not be accepted at face value: while the tribe may have been massacred to some extent in the aftermath of the conflict, the Nasamones have still been attested in the region in later times.

The size and content of the account may also be influenced by specific intentions of the author. For instance, in the case of the Revolt of Tacfarinas in Africa Proconsularis during the reign of Tiberius, Tacitus appears to be the only author who pays much attention to the conflict. It may not be a coincidence that he was not a great admirer of Tiberius. Tacitus may have integrated the Revolt of Tacfarinas in his work because of his antipathy towards the emperor. Indeed, the lengthy and recurrent reports clearly succeed in reconstructing the image of an emperor that is fairly incapable to restore Roman authority. This elaborated account can be contrasted with Velleius Paterculus or Aurelius Victor, who commit no more than a few words to the conflict. Obviously, Tacitus cannot be expected to have shared the same concern with Velleius Paterculus, whose work lavished praise on Tiberius. The statement of the latter resembles the announcement made by Aurelius Victor, who merely related that Tiberius

“surpressed the banditries of the Gaetulians, which, lead by Tacfarinas, broke out everywhere” (Aur. Vict. De Caes. 2, 3). This briefness is not unusual; revolts don’t seem to have been a particularly hot topic to write about. So literary accounts often reveal all but little information about the revolts. They frequently provide just a general identification of the rebels and few data, if any, about their motives.

It may not surprise that revolts of this kind are seriously underrepresented. This may be illustrated by Dio Cassius, who seems to confirm these observations with the following statement: “...there were also numerous other disturbances going on in various regions; yet inasmuch as nothing of importance resulted from them, the Romans at the time did not consider that they were engaged in war, nor have I, for my part, anything notable to record about them.” (Dio Cass. 51, 20, 5).

Cassius Dio clearly refers to the existence of several conflicts throughout the empire, but these are, apparently, not worth mentioning. This may of course be due to the importance of the events at this time, namely the political developments at Rome after the Battle of Actium. Nevertheless, the statement may well be an indication of the lack of interest in the topic of insurgency shown by classical authors.

Inscriptions on durable materials may offer important additional information to literary accounts. They may even reveal events and developments which, apparently, were perceived by ancient historians as insufficiently relevant, important or acceptable to be incorporated in their works. However, this source type is quantitatively determined by the rise and fall of the epigraphic habit. One may question whether this situation effects the visibility of conflicts.

For instance, during the seventies and eighties, scholars have criticized the old perception of “pax romana” and the view that since the reign of Augustus provincial government was much improved in favour of the provincial population. The abundance of all kinds of opposition to the Roman order and disturbances has been mentioned as a crucial indicator (Pékary 1987 ; Goodman 1994). While considering the changed impact of empire when the character and concerns of Roman imperialism transformed, one may also question to what extent this higher number of attestations of the imperial period was caused by the changed quality and quantity of the sources? Considering the development of the epigraphic habit, the importance of inscriptions cannot be expected to be as crucial during the Republican period.

Perhaps North Africa may not be a good context here, since the region was largely neglected during the Republican period. However, the following observations in the region may emphasize the increasing importance the epigraphic record. Firstly, one out of three of the conflicts of the imperial period are merely epigraphically attested. Secondly, in half of the cases of the first century inscriptions furnish crucial additional evidence on the course of events, the causes, the localization or the chronological delimitations of the conflicts. This tendency culminates in the second century, when inscriptions form the most important sources on conflicts in North Africa as in almost all the cases, literary sources either do not render valuable information, or they do not exist.

It should also be noted that in the western provinces inscriptions are, again, primarily set up by Roman(-sided) actors. They also tend to mention the conflict rather compendiously and rarely enable an exact date for the event they refer to, because in many cases they merely form indirect attestations of conflict. These characteristics render the analysis particularly difficult.

For instance, in Mauretania Caesariensis and Tingitana, several governors administered the provinces with a special command, not serving as regular procuratores, but as “procuratores pro legato”¹. This special office gave the equestrian governors the right to command legionary units. However, it is not clear whether these governors were occupied with offensive or defensive missions.

Also in the case of Beryllus, a “restitutor metallorum” at Vipasca in Lusitania, similar doubts may be cast on the view that he had to restore the exploitation of the mines because these had been disrupted by the Moorish raids that ravaged southern Spain in the last quarter of the second century A.D. (IRCPacen 121). Although there are other attestations on these incursions, this interpretation still remains fairly speculative since other dates and explanations for the interruption of the mining activities are definitely not ruled out.

As a consequence of these complexities, an impressive number of the attestations of conflict in Roman North Africa from the end of the Republic to the reign of Septimius Severus cannot be precisely categorized as rebellions, acts of banditry, incursions or Roman offensive campaigns.

3. Digging insurgence

Fortunately, the historian may still turn to another source type to analyse the cases, namely archaeology. These sources provide additional data, as they will inform us about Roman military activities, such as the construction of encampments and sentries. They may reveal destructions and the abandonment of sites, which may result from military confrontations. They also play a crucial role in the contextualization of the revolts. However, an (exact) date of sites and artefacts may be difficult to assess, and (therefore) archaeological sources are often all but ambiguously interpreted.

Such a case can be found in Tripolitania. Tacitus informs us that in 70 A.D. **Lepcis Magna** found itself involved in a conflict with a neighbouring town called Oea after a few peasants had stolen some wheat and cattle (Tac. Hist. IV, 50). Unable to withstand its stronger opponent, **Oea** asked the nomadic tribe of the **Garamantes** for support. At that point, the Romans intervened and eventually the Garamantes were repulsed. This conflict has been connected with the so-called Zliten Mosaics, which depict differently coloured men thrown at bestias in an amphitheatre. According to a number of scholars the Zliten Mosaics should be

¹ For instance, P. Besius Betuinianus C. Marius Memmius Sabinus. AE 1968, 654.

dated to the Flavian period (Ville 1963 ; Dunbabin 1978 178). This date made them to identify them with the Garamantes who ravaged the country of Lepcis Magna. On the other hand, other scholars have argued on the basis of stylistic and iconographic arguments allows for a later date, namely the third century A.D. (Parrish 1985). If the latter observation is right, the connection made with the conflict between Lepcis Magna and the Garamantes seems highly implausible.

Obviously, less uncertainty may mark the analysis when a higher number of sites and artefacts is involved. So the literarily attested Moorish raids during the reign of Marcus Aurelius are held responsible for numerous destructions in the south of the Iberian peninsula.

At **Aratispi**, the abandonment of an olive mill during the second half of the second century A.D. been related with these raids, as well as the disruption of mining activities at the **Rio Tinto mines** (Jones 1980 ; Perdiguero 1995-1996). The evidence is also enforced by honorific inscriptions set up by the inhabitants of **Italica** and **Singilia Barba** to thank the procurator of Mauretania Tingitana, C. Vallius Maximianus, for his efforts to relief them from the Mauri (AE 1961, 339; AE 1961, 340).

However, the connection between literary attestations and the material evidence is often based on relative dates derived from ceramics and coinage. This should always be kept in mind when the tempting allusion to the Moorish incursions is made once more. This is particularly clear in the case of Beryllus at **Vipasca** I mentioned earlier, but also in the case of the destroyed aqueducts of **Emerita Augusta**. In order to date these destructions, the archaeologist who studied these aqueducts looked for a suitable event somewhere between the reign of Hadrian and Constantine. It may not surprise you that he also pointed to the Moorish raids as well (Jimenez 1975). But again, different dates and explanations are not ruled out. In this case, a wholly different pitfall becomes apparent: namely the danger of creating revolts that are heavily overestimated.

We may conclude that the most important shortcomings to archaeological sources as attestations of conflict may be the relative dating uncertainties, as well as the identification of agents and the reconstruction of their motives. Obviously, archaeology can hardly provide convincing reconstructions by itself.

4. Case: Tiberius' War on Terror? (15/16 A.D. – 24 A.D.)

In the ideal case, the sources are multiform and are mutually complementary. This is not the case for the Revolt of Tacfarinas I mentioned before. Nevertheless I want to end my contribution by using this case in order to illustrate how by the aid of the numismatic, epigraphic and archaeological sources on this conflict, Tacitus' discourse can be by-passed and a wholly different account can be reconstructed.

1. According to Tacitus

Tacitus dates the onset of the revolt of this large coalition of (semi-)nomadic tribes in 17 A.D. and situates it geographically in the North African province (Tac. Ann. 2, 52).

With regard to the motives of the insurgents, the author gives no direct indications. Tacitus' description suggests that war was instigated by the indigenous tribes and that they merely committed themselves to large-scale ordinary banditry and terrorism. So Tacfarinas is called a "latro" and a "praedo" (Tac. Ann. 3, 73), a bandit, who plundered the province ("raptabat Africam", Tac. Ann. 4, 23) and who intended merely the accumulation of conflagrations, murders and terror ("incendia et caedes et terrorem", Tac. Ann. 2, 52) as well as booty ("praedas", Tac. Ann. 3, 20). As a general goal, "libertas" or freedom is mentioned only once and merely briefly (Tac. Ann. 2, 24). Tacitus also mentions that Tacfarinas sent an envoy to the emperor, demanding a "sedes" and a "concessio agrorum" (Tac. Ann. 3, 73). But these demands are presented as a shameful demand to buy off peace to the profit of those represented as the lowest of all men.

Thirdly, Tacitus mentions the involvement of the client kings of Mauretania who neighboured Rome's African province only at the end of the conflict (Tac. Ann. 4, 24).

2. Insights provided by numismatics, epigraphy and archaeology

A. Numismatic sources: a different date and setting of the conflict's onset + a different account of the engagement of the client kings

Firstly, in the context of their military activities these client kings edited coin types which depicted military themes like Victoria, goddess of victory, and the war elephant. One may perceive these coins as important indicators of warfare and unrest. These attestations have not merely been attested between 17 and 24 A.D., the time span which is covered by the account of Tacitus. At least one of these coins can even be dated to the fortieth year of the client king's reign, which corresponds to late 15 A.D. to late 16 A.D. (Maz. 283)².

² Maz. = Mazard, J. and J. Babelon (1955). *Corpus nummorum Numidiae Mauretaniaeque*. Paris, Arts et métiers graphiques.

Therefore these coins not merely propose a little earlier date for this conflict. They also tend to show that the client kings were actually engaged in this conflict well before the Romans did. Most surprisingly, this observation points to an interesting analogy with the initial context of the Gaetulian War. For this conflict that shook the province a decade earlier, in which the same client king was in power and the same tribes were involved, Dio Cassius indicates that the initial setting of warfare is to be found in Mauretania (Dio Cass. 55, 28, 3-4; cf. Vell. Pat. 2, 116, 3).

Both revolts thus reveal the unsuccessfulness of the client kings to control the Numidian and Maurusian tribes that were assigned to them. Therefore, it is feasible to think that this lack of success may have played an important role in the protectorate's downfall during the reign of Gaius.

B. Archaeology and epigraphy & the conflict's causes

The reconstruction of the causes of the Revolt of Tacfarinas can be greatly enriched by introducing epigraphic and archaeological sources. These tend to show that the tribes were not solely engaged in a quest for booty. There are a number of reasons to suppose that the conflict rather had the character of a rebellion against an offensive Roman frontier policy that provoked the increase of Roman control in the region. Firstly, in the years leading up to the revolt, a camp at Ammaedara and a road was built close to the territory of the Musulamii, the most important tribe of the coalition lead by Tacfarinas (ex.: AE 1905, 177). Secondly, epigraphic sources comprising cadastral border stones attest that the Romans also indulged in land measurements very shortly after the conflict (ex.: CIL 8, 22786a/f/k). These measurements may have been a prelude to the advent of colonies, or, more probably, to taxation. So these archaeological and epigraphic sources show us a story untold by Tacitus, namely the progressive consolidation of Roman control of the interior of the African province.

3. Tacitus rehabilitated? The trade-or-raid model from anthropology.

But the so-called trade-or-raid model may rehabilitate Tacitus as a source on the events in the interior of Africa Proconsularis. In his study on relations between nomads and sedentarists, the anthropologist Khazanov has pointed to two frequent conflict types between both groups (Khazanov 1994). The first explanatory model is fundamentally based on the implications of the highly specialized economy of nomadic societies, and has frequently been applied by other scholars to analyze the relations between the Xiongnu Empire and China³.

According to this model, the lack of economic autarchy of pastoral nomadic tribes gives rise to the so-called "trade or raid"-paradigm. In order to acquire certain commodities nomadic

³ On the feasibility of the application of this model between Xiongnu and China, cf. Di Cosmo, N. (1994). "Ancient Inner Asian nomads: their economic basis and its significance in Chinese history." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53(4): 1092-1126.

groups have to fall back on sedentarist economies. This need is obviously particularly high in the case of a natural disaster, like droughts, which severely affect flock numbers. If the nomadic population group is not able to acquire the necessary goods through trade, they may decide to take it *manu militari*. Now, does this model apply in this case? It seems to allow for a rehabilitation of Tacitus' account, which indeed emphasizes the aspects of booty and banditry.

However, at least four observations may question an affirmative answer to this question. Firstly, there are no indications of an environmental disaster. Secondly, one should take into account that there are no signs that exchange possibilities were changed. It is doubtful whether the pastoral movements could be efficiently obstructed by the road built by Asprenas. Thirdly, it should be remembered that the Musulamii formed a semi-nomadic tribe, which made them more autarchic than fully nomadic tribes. One may provide a fourth counterargument by connecting Tacitus' discourse to the overall negative Roman perception of nomadism, or by linking it with an effort to evoke the hit-and-run strategies of the military tribes.

Therefore, the evidence still seems to allow us to classify the conflict as one of the many cases Khazanov inventoried as typical consequences of the efforts of colonial and national governments which seek to impose direct control and taxation, or to solve problems which ensued from the growth of the agriculturalist population.

4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we may pose that the Revolt of Tacfarinas is an excellent case that argues in favour of a method that includes the analysis of all types of sources we have at our disposal, an approach that may succeed in by-passing the explanations offered by literary sources.

In this case, Tiberius was not so much involved in a "war on terror" and banditry, as Tacitus seems to describe it, but rather in a conflict against insurgents opposing the loss of land or the payment of taxes. Tacitus' statement that Tacfarinas demanded a "sedes" and a "concessio agrorum" should be put in wholly different perspective.

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