

TACITUS, DOMITIAN AND THE PROCONSULSHIP OF AGRICOLA

Chapter 42 of the *Agricola* records the details of one historical incident, Agricola's withdrawal from candidacy for the proconsulship of Asia or Africa. In recent years, Tacitus' account of this episode has generated more controversy than any other single passage in this already overtaxed work. It has been variously dismissed as a malicious fabrication¹), and defended for its historical accuracy²). Critics and defenders alike have expended a great deal of unnecessary effort. The latter have either accepted Tacitus' account even while conceding the palpable distortions upon which it rests³), or have gone to the extreme of defending the entire passage⁴). The former in turn have felt compelled to offer alternatives to Tacitus' sinister presentation. Fanciful conclusions have resulted. H. W. Traub argued that Agricola's refusal of a proconsulship was neither unusual nor unprecedented, and that he did not even request the *salarium*⁵). Von Fritz properly disputed⁶). T. A. Dorey went so far as to argue that Agricola had to be persuaded to decline the proconsulship because of ill-health, and that Domitian was thus acting in Agricola's best interest⁷). As evidence he could cite only that three years later Agricola was dead! The present writer

1) Most recently by R. Urban, *Historische Untersuchungen zum Domitianbild des Tacitus* (Munich, 1971) 60-64; T. A. Dorey, "'Agricola' and 'Germania'", Tacitus, ed. T. A. Dorey (London, 1969) 6-7; I. Forni, *Taciti De Vita Iulii Agricola* (Roma, 1962) 31-32.

2) R. M. Ogilvie and I. A. Richmond, *De Vita Agricola* (Oxford, 1967) 18, 284, 294; E. R. Schwinge, "Festinata Mors, zum Ende des Taciteischen Agricola", *RhM*, 106 (1963) 368-369; K. von Fritz, "Tacitus, Agricola, Domitian and the Problem of the Principate", *CPh*, 52 (1957) 73-77.

3) As R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958) 24, 67 n. 6.

4) Ogilvie-Richmond, *De Vita Agricola*, 18, 284, 294; K. von Fritz, *CPh*, 52 (1957) 73-77.

5) H. W. Traub, "Agricola's Refusal of a Governorship", *CPh*, 49 (1954) 255-257.

6) *CPh*, 52 (1957) 73-77.

7) T. A. Dorey, "Agricola and Domitian", *G & R*, s. s. 7 (1960) 66-71; reprinted in Tacitus, 6-7.

reluctantly enters the controversy to suggest that, in fact, Tacitus' use of innuendo has obscured what must have been a frequent and straightforward procedure.

Tacitus outlines the sequence of events as follows: during the year of Agricola's eligibility, individuals in the Emperor's confidence came to him, and urged him to decline the proconsulship. Persuaded by their exhortations and threats, and with the murder of Cerialis as an example, Agricola allowed himself to be brought before Domitian, who granted his request to withdraw his candidacy. Domitian did not, however, offer the stipend normally granted to a proconsul-elect who had to decline his appointment. The sacrifice of a proconsulship thus deflected the Emperor's anger and hatred.

A cursory examination of the text will reveal the pervasiveness of the non-factual element in this passage:

Aderat iam annus, quo proconsulatum Africae et Asiae sortiretur, *et occiso Civica nuper nec Agricolae consilium deerat nec Domitiano exemplum*. accessere *quidam* cogitationum principis periti, qui iturusne esset in provinciam *ultra* Agricolam interrogarent. *ac primo occultius quietem et otium laudare, mox operam suam in adprobanda excusatione offerre, postremo non iam obscuri suadentes simul terrentesque* pertraxere ad Domitianum. *qui paratus simulatione, in adrogantiam compositus*, et audiit preces excusantis et, cum adnuisset, agi sibi gratias passus est, *nec erubuit beneficii invidia*. salarium tamen proconsulare solitum offerri et quibusdam a se ipso concessum Agricolae non dedit, *sive offensus non petitem, sive ex conscientia, ne quod vetuerat videretur emisse. proprium humani ingenii est odisse quem laeseris: Domitiani vero natura praeceptis in iram, et quo obscurior, eo inrevocabilior, moderatione tamen prudentiaque Agricolae leniebatur, quia non contumacia neque inani iactatione libertatis famam fatumque provocabat.*

Urban has ably demonstrated some of the contradictions in this account⁸⁾. It might be added that the power of the narrative comes precisely from its weakest elements: the enigmatic reference to Civica Cerialis, the vague *quidam*, and particularly the menacing and hypocritical attitude arbitrarily ascribed to Domitian by a writer who personally witnessed none of the events described⁹⁾. It is all very florid, but unless Domitian was

8) R. Urban, Domitianbild, 61.

9) Tacitus was abroad, probably holding either a legionary legateship or a praetorian governorship: Agr. 45.

in the habit of broadcasting his innermost thoughts – which is rather unlikely – then it is proper to ask just how Tacitus knew that a base motive lay behind Domitian's conduct. This element of the episode is a fiction, its source Tacitus' own imagination. It is without substance, and any conclusion based upon it is valueless.

With the innuendo stripped away, then, the episode appears in a very different light. The year had arrived in which Agricola would be eligible for the *sortitio* for Africa or Asia. He was questioned as to his intentions. Choosing not to be a candidate, he appeared before Domitian, and formally requested the withdrawal of his name from consideration. The request was granted¹⁰).

Two points may further clarify the account. First, it is evident from Dio Cassius (lxxix. 22.5) that the *salarium* was granted not to candidates for a proconsulship, but to proconsuls-elect who for one reason or another had to refuse their appointment. Agricola, however, never received a senatorial proconsulship. *Quo proconsulatum Africae et Asiae sortiretur* makes it very clear that he was eligible for one of the two proconsulships, but that he had withdrawn his candidacy before the *sortitio* actually took place. As a result, he was not offered the *salarium*, and did not request it, because he was not entitled to it.

Second, this passage is liable to misinterpretation only if it is assumed that the *sortitio* was genuinely random. The evidence, however, fragmentary as it is, supports Mommsen's contention that the candidates were carefully screened¹¹). The Emperor seems to have drawn up a list of candidates, perhaps containing the names of six to ten consulars¹²), in order of seniority¹³). The laws on marriage and children would accelerate a consular's eligibility for the *sortitio*¹⁴); they also influenced the allotment

10) The episode occurs after the death of Civica Cerialis, proconsul of Asia in 88/89. Not in 89 – Domitian was absent from Rome after 12 January. As Agricola was consul in 77, presumably in 90 for the proconsulship of 90/91. P. Calvisius Ruso Iulius Frontinus, consul in 79, proconsul in 92/93, compares.

11) Th. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht*, vol. 2, pt. 1 (3rd ed. rep. Basel, 1952) 253. The following references is also to this volume.

12) Th. Mommsen, *Röm. Staatsr.*, 253.

13) Tac. Ann. iii. 71: "ita sors Asiae in eum, qui consularium Maluginensi proximus erat, conlata;" Dio Cass. lxxix. 22: "τῷ Φάστῳ τὴν Ἀσίαν, καίπερ παροφθέντι τὴν τοῦ κλήρου τάξιν ὑπὸ τοῦ Σευήρου, ἐνεχείρισεν."

14) Tac. Ann. xv. 19; M. Cornelius Fronto, *Epistulae*, ed. M. P. J.

among the successful candidates¹⁵). An impartial *sortitio* thus definitely appears not to have been employed in the election of the two proconsuls, and was not consistently employed in the distribution of their provinces¹⁶).

As it was the Emperor's responsibility to draw up a list of candidates, it is obvious that Agricola, like all other potential candidates, would have to be queried as to his availability. Discussion of the episode could end on this note: Agricola was approached, and declined to be a candidate. However, to dispel Tacitus' innuendo, it is important at least to try and determine Domitian's criteria for the selection of candidates.

Apart from seniority and ineligibility due to previous tenure of a senatorial proconsulship¹⁷), the list of proconsuls for the years 85/86–96/97 reveals a pattern that suggests a further restriction on the part of Domitian. Sixteen proconsuls are known¹⁸); only two can be classified as *virī militares*: Sex. Iulius Frontinus (Asia, 86/87), formerly governor of Britain and possibly of Germania Inferior¹⁹), and L. Funisulanus Vettonianus (Africa, 91/92), formerly governor of Dalmatia, Moesia Superior, and Pannonia²⁰). Tacitus of course would assert that Domitian was motivated by fear and hatred in excluding *virī militares*. This is easily dispelled. Vettonianus received the proconsulship of Africa at least two years after the execution of Cerialis in Asia; the latter's execution thus did not deter the appointment of other *virī militares*²¹). Furthermore, as the two

Van Den Hout (Leiden, 1954) 161. The rapid proconsulship of C. Asinius Gallus, who had five children, is the best example (cos. 8 B.C., procos. of Asia 6/5 B.C.); PIR² A 1229.

15) Tac. Ann. xv. 19; Fronto Ep. 161.

16) For the latter, see Tac. Ann. iii. 32; 58; 71; Dio Cass. lxxix. 22; and the evidence presented below for the proconsulships of *virī militares* under Hadrian.

17) There are no examples of a man holding an iterated senatorial proconsulship.

18) W. Eck, *Senatoren von Vespasian bis Hadrian* (Munich, 1970) 234, 236, is the most recent and authoritative listing.

19) Asia: G. Monaco, "Sull' iscrizione della porta onoraria nord di Hierapolis di Frigia", *ASAA*, 25–26 (1963/64) 409–410; Germania Inferior: CIL XIII. 8624, and the comments of W. Eck, *Senatoren*, 81–82. Rejected by PIR² J 322. Britain: Agr. 17.

20) Africa: AE 1946, 205.

21) Civica Cerialis governed Moesia, with its four legions, in 82 (CIL XVI. 28). He was probably executed for complicity in the rebellion of Antonius Saturninus. See D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of*

provinces did not contain troops, their governors could not possibly represent a threat to the Emperor. Equally, however, the striking absence of *virī militares* is not fortuitous. During the reign of Hadrian, for example, six of the twelve known proconsuls of Africa were *virī militares*²²), a percentage which suggests that they were allowed to compete for the proconsulships, and if successful, assigned to Africa²³).

It may be suggested, then, that it was Domitian's policy to reserve the proconsulships of Asia and Africa for those senators pursuing a civil rather than a military career, a class which considered these proconsulships the apex of the senatorial career. As for the two exceptions, Vettonianus perhaps qualified more because of age and past impediments in his career²⁴) than for his three consular legateships and services against the Dacians²⁵), Frontinus because of outstanding service to the Flavian dynasty in three military theatres²⁶).

An iterated consulship would normally be a viable alternative for outstanding *virī militares*. A. Lappius Maximus, who suppressed the revolt of Antonius Saturninus, provides an example²⁷). There was, however, severe competition for the consulship during the last years of Domitian's reign because the

the Third Century after Christ (Princeton, 1950) 578. Although he governed Moesia, certain peculiarities in Cerialis' career suggest that he was not a *vir militaris*; I hope to discuss this in a future paper.

22) L. Minicius Natalis (cos. 106, governor of Pannonia Superior, procos. 121/22); M. Atilius Metilius Bradua (cos. 108, Britain and Germania Inferior, procos. 122/23); L. Catilius Severus Iulianus Claudius Reginus (cos. 110, Cappadocia-Armenia and Syria, procos. 124/25); C. Ummidius Quadratus (cos. 118, Moesia Inferior, procos. 133/34); C. Bruttius Praesens (cos. *anno incerto*, Cappadocia and Moesia Inferior, procos. 134/35); L. Vitrasius Flamininus (cos. 122, Moesia Superior, procos. 137/38).

23) In contrast, only one of the sixteen proconsuls of Asia was a *vir militaris*: Q. Pompeius Falco (cos. 108, Moesia Inferior and Britain, procos. 123/24).

24) He was *legatus legionis* of IV Scythica during Paetus' disastrous campaign of 62 A.D. (Ann. xv. 7), and subsequently ignored by Nero.

25) ILS 1005; CIL XVI. 30; 31.

26) Against the Lingones in 70 (Str. iv. 3. 14); in Britain against the Silures in 74-77 (Agr. 17); and in Germany against the Chatti in 83-84 (Str. i. 1. 8; 3. 10; ii. 3. 23; 11. 7). See P. Weynand, "T. Flavius Domitianus", RE, 6 (1909) 2556.

27) *Consul I suffectus* in 86, *consul II suffectus* in 95. He would, at any rate, have been ineligible for a proconsulship until 101. Tib. Iulius Candidus Marius Celsus, also *consul suffectus* in 86, was proconsul of Asia in 101/02.

Emperor chose to limit the *fasti* to two pairs of suffect consuls²⁸).

The restriction on iterated consulships, and on the senatorial proconsulships, meant that many eminent *virī militares* would have to forego further honors. Agricola is not even the most prominent example; that honor belongs to L. Tettius Iulianus, who defeated the Dacians in 88. There are other examples²⁹).

Agricola, then, may well have been urged by Domitian's agents to renounce formally his candidacy for a senatorial proconsulship. Tacitus' sinister account of the episode, however, appears to be unfounded. If Domitian had an ulterior motive, it was not fear or jealousy, but a policy which reserved these proconsulships for senators pursuing the civil career.

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28) From 91 to 96 A.D. That Maximus' iterated consulship was as a *suffectus* attests the pressure.

29) P. Valerius Patruinus was governor of Syria in 88 (CIL XVI. 35) when the appearance of a new "false Nero" threatened war with Parthia (Suetonius Nero 57). He may have induced the Parthians to surrender the pretender. No further dignities, however, are known.