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 fabrication\(^1\), and defended for its historical accuracy\(^2\). 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 rests\(^3\), or have gone to the extreme of defending the entire passage\(^4\). 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 disputed\(^6\). 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 interest\(^7\). As evidence he could cite only that three years later Agricola was dead! The present writer

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


6) CPh, 52 (1957) 73–77.

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 deerrat nec Domitianum exemplum. accessere quidam cogitationum principis periti, qui iturus esse in provinciam ulro Agricolam interrogarent. ac primo occultus quiete et otium laudare, mox operam suam in adprobanda excusatione offerre, postremo non iam obscuri suadentes simul terrentesque petraxere ad Domitianum. qui paratus simulatione, in adrogantiam compositus, et auditi preces excusantis et, cum adduisset, agi sibi gratias passus est, nec erubuit beneficii invidia. salarium tamen proconsulare solutum offerr et quibusdam a se ipso concessum Agricolae non dedit, sive offensus non petitum, sive ex conscientia, ne quod vetuerat videretur emisse. proprium humani ingenii est odisse quem laeseris: Domitiani vero nature praceps in iram, et quo obscurior, eo inrevocabilior, moderatione tamen prudentiaque Agricolae leniebat, quia non contumacia neque inani iactatirne ligeritas famam fatumque provocabat.

Urban has ably demonstrated some of the contradictions in this account 8). 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 described 9). 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 granted.

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 screened. The Emperor seems to have drawn up a list of candidates, perhaps containing the names of six to ten consulars, in order of seniority. The laws on marriage and children would accelerate a consular’s eligibility for the sortitio; 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.


14) Tac. Ann. xv. 19; M. Cornelius Fronto, Epistulae, ed. M. P. J.
among the successful candidates\(^{15}\)). 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 provinces\(^{18}\)).

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 proconsulship\(^{17}\)), 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 known\(^{18}\); only two can be classified as *viri militares*: Sex. Iulius Frontinus (Asia, 86/87), formerly governor of Britain and possibly of Germania Inferior\(^{19}\), and L. Funisulanus Vettonianus (Africa, 91/92), formerly governor of Dalmatia, Moesia Superior, and Pannonia\(^{20}\). Tacitus of course would assert that Domitian was motivated by fear and hatred in excluding *viri 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 *viri militares*\(^{21}\). Furthermore, as the two

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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.); PIR\(^2\) A 1229.

16) For the latter, see Tac. Ann. iii. 32; 58; 71; Dio Cass. lxxix. 22; and the evidence presented below for the proconsulships of *viri 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.
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 *viri militares* is not fortuitous. During the reign of Hadrian, for example, six of the twelve known proconsuls of Africa were *viri militares* 22), a percentage which suggests that they were allowed to compete for the proconsulships, and if successful, assigned to Africa 23).

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 career 24) than for his three consular legateships and services against the Dacians 25), Frontinus because of outstanding service to the Flavian dynasty in three military theatres 26).

An iterated consulship would normally be a viable alternative for outstanding *viri militares*. A. Lappius Maximus, who suppressed the revolt of Antonius Saturninus, provides an example 27). There was, however, severe competition for the consulship during the last years of Domitian’s reign because the

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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. Attilius 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 inerto*, 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 consuls\(^2\).

The restriction on iterated consulships, and on the senatorial proconsulships, meant that many eminent *viri 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 examples\(^3\).

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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\(^2\) From 91 to 96 A.D. That Maximus’ iterated consulship was as a *suffectus* attests the pressure.

\(^3\) 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.